

The Fourth Revolution in Mission to Chinese Overseas Students: A Theology of “Outgoing” in the Light of a Survey of Chinese Catholic Youths in Europe

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Abstract: China is the world’s largest source of international students, with 1.021 million students studying abroad in 2021. According to my preliminary estimation, among these students, there are only about 206 Chinese Catholic youths in Europe. This paper is a theological reflection based on my interviews with 13 of them, aged 22-35. The main question of this reflection is how the European society and Church, and the “outgoing experience” of these Chinese students have influenced their faith or affected the construction of their Christian identity. My methodology is partly inspired by Étienne Grieu’s concept of “resonance” which highlights the resonance between the life story of the poor, the Bible, and the inner movement of the listener-theologian.

Based on the analysis of my interviews with these Chinese students, and by distinguishing between theological or theoretical (Bible and theology) resonance and pastoral or practical (pastoral action) resonance, and associating the latter with historical resonance, this paper concludes that the “outgoing” experience, as the very life dynamism of the Holy Trinity and of Jesus, is the only way for Christians and the Church to construct their Christian identity. And the Christian identity construction of the Chinese overseas students, as an outgoing experience, can help reconstructing the identity of the Church in China. Therefore, the pastoral resonance is to help these Chinese overseas students to deepen their faith. For me, following the footsteps of Matteo Ripa (1682–1746), Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940), and the missionary congregations (since 1990s), this pastoral action can be considered as the fourth revolution in mission to Chinese Catholic overseas lay students, which will bring about a turning point in the destiny of the Church in China.

Introduction: A Methodology in Practical Theology

According to the “Blue Book of the Report on the Development of Chinese Overseas Students (2023–2024),” “since the reform and opening up of China, the total number of students studying abroad has surpassed 8 million, with over 6 million returning to China

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after their studies abroad.”¹ At the present time, “China remains the world’s largest source of international students, with 1.021 million students studying abroad in 2021, more than double that of India, the second largest country in this regard.”² In Europe,

*China has been the predominant source of international students in Germany in recent years [...]. In the 2021/22 academic year, 40,055 Chinese students studied in Germany. The number of Chinese international students pursuing studies in France has remained relatively consistent over the past decade, with an average of approximately 29,000 students enrolled each year [...]. In the 2021/22 academic year, Chinese students constituted 7.00% of the total number of students enrolled in French universities, ranking as the third largest group of international students (the first two countries are Morocco with 11.81% and Algeria with 7.90%) [...]. There are 5,674 Chinese students in Italy, 3,222 in Spain and 2,820 in Switzerland.*³

These students include Chinese Catholic youths studying philosophy, theology, and other ecclesiastical disciplines. There are not many Chinese Catholic youths above the undergraduate level actively engaged in Chinese Catholic communities in European countries. According to our preliminary estimation, there are about 206 of them, as shown in the following chart.⁴

Italy	Germany	Spain	France	Portugal	Netherlands	Austria	Poland	Belgium	Hungary
62	42	30	25	20	7	7	6	6	1

My report is based on interviews with 13 of them (5 males and 8 females). Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. The participants hailed from 9 provinces and municipalities in China and studied in 8 countries in Europe. Their ages ranged from 22-35 years old, with 3 undergraduates, 5 graduate students, and 5 doctoral students; including 7 “born Catholics” (baptized as infants), 5 neophytes (baptized within 10 years, one of whom was baptized abroad), and 1 former Protestant who converted to Catholicism. The majority of Chinese students in Europe are graduate and doctoral students, and thus, this study places emphasis on these latter two categories. Among the 13 individuals, 4 of them specialized in theology, Church history, and other ecclesiastical disciplines.

1 Centre for China & Globalization (CCG), “Blue Book of the Report on the Development of Chinese Overseas Students (2023–2024),” <http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/84288> (accessed July 1, 2024).

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 The data were provided by the priests responsible for Chinese Catholic communities in each European country. They are limited to the Chinese Catholic students these priests know and have heard of. It is worth noting that the number of young Chinese Catholic students from the United Kingdom and Ireland has not been included in this data, because the English speaking countries, like the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, form one cultural system which is different from continental European countries that are regarded as belonging to another cultural system. Additionally, although the United Kingdom and Ireland are both located in Europe, they are not part of the Schengen Agreement, and the United Kingdom is no longer part of the European Union. As a consequence of the complexity of visa applications, the Chinese Catholic communities and Chinese Catholic youths in the aforementioned two countries rarely engage with those in continental countries. I interviewed one student from Ireland as she is the sole young Catholic person in Ireland who has interactions with Chinese Catholic youths in the continental countries. She has never had any contact with a Chinese Catholic community in Ireland. Moreover, her understanding of and stance towards the Irish Church were analogous to those of the Catholic youths in the continental countries, probably because both the Irish and the continental churches are facing similar crises of de-Christianization and secularization.

Despite the diversity of their backgrounds, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive account of the situation of all Chinese Catholic youths in Europe. Although they share certain common characteristics, it would be inaccurate to suggest that they are “representative” of all Chinese Catholic youths in Europe, as each youth’s situation is unique. However, insights can be gained into the state of faith of some Chinese Catholic youths studying in Europe by examining the experiences of these 13 young people.

My interviews mainly focused on how the European society and Church, and their “outgoing experience”⁵ influenced their faith. I define “faith” as the awareness of Christian identity and the way of expressing and living it in mission. This is because the “living faith” consists in the unity of what Christians are (identity) and what they do (mission). Therefore, my interview questions include the following five dimensions: 1. What is the way you express your Christian identity and live out your faith? 2. Have the European societies and churches helped you to deepen your faith? 3. Have the European societies and churches presented challenges or disturbances to your faith? 4. Has your awareness of the Chinese Christian identity and mission changed or been enhanced since your arrival in Europe for studies? 5. What would you like the Chinese Catholic communities in Europe or other Catholic organizations which can serve the Chinese in Europe to do in order to help you deepen your faith?

The last question concerns the methodology of this paper. It is not just a survey, but a reflection on practical theology based on this survey. The methodology of this paper is partly inspired by Étienne Grieu’s concept of “resonance.” Grieu is a French Jesuit and former rector of Facultés Loyola Paris. He initiated a practical theology for listening to the poor. His methodological innovation consists in highlighting the “resonance” or “vibration” between the life story of the poor, the Bible, and the inner movement of the listener-theologian. This resonance has the potential to prompt the theologian listening to the narratives of the poor to rethink and reinterpret the traditional doctrinal issues. Convinced that there is a deep faith and theological significance in the narratives of the poor and the simple people, Grieu emphasizes that we should listen without preconceptions and allow the narratives to unfold naturally under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to ensure as much as possible that what is being heard is the narrator’s own “theology.”⁶

However, I think that Grieu’s methodology has its limitations in two ways: Firstly, it is limited to listening to the life story; secondly, its goal is only to reformulate traditional doctrines⁷ rather than to be directed toward pastoral practice. But in my opinion, on the one hand, there are various ways of listening, and different ways of listening are needed to achieve different purposes of the practical theology; on the other hand, pastoral practice is important and necessary. For this reason, I started the interviews with some specific questions to find out the resonance between the interviewee’s answers and the Bible and

5 By “outgoing experience” I mean that of leaving one’s familiar cultural, social, and linguistic environment and coming to a new situation. This kind of experience is not only confined to immigrants and students, but also occurs in different regions and social structures within the same country.

6 Cf. Étienne Grieu, *Nés de Dieu. Itinéraires de chrétiens engagés. Essai de lecture théologique*, Cogitatio Fidei 231, Paris : Cerf 2007.

7 Cf. Étienne Grieu, “Méthodes biographiques et théologie pratique,” in: *Didaskalia* 39 (2009) 2, pp. 136-137; “Quelle place pour la Bible dans l’élaboration du discours en théologie pratique?,” in: Luca Bressan – Gilles Routhier (eds.), *Le travail de la Parole*, Théologie pastorale 8, Bruxelles: Lumen Vitae 2011, p. 110.

the interviewer, who is both a theological scholar and a pastor. I distinguish two kinds of resonance related to the interviewee's answers: one is theological or theoretical (Bible and theology), and the other is pastoral or practical (pastoral action). If I add the latter resonance it is because if one really resonates with the narratives of those being listened to, one cannot stand by. After all, neither the poor nor anyone in need is first and foremost an object to be analyzed and abstracted from theological thinking, but rather a person to be cared for. Christian faith comes from the experience of the apostles' encounter with Jesus and is orientated to the same experience of people today.⁸ Although doctrinal or theological interpretation is a necessary path to enable people to encounter Christ today, it is not an end in itself. That is why I asked the interviewees the fifth question.

Having been away from home and studying abroad for almost 18 years myself, a question that resonates with the interviewees and the Bible is: How does the experience of being away from home affect the construction of a Christian's identity? What would be the correlation between this construction of identity and the development of an ecclesial community to which the Christian belongs? Both the people of Israel in the Old Testament and the early Christians in the New Testament had the experience of being away from home: the exodus of Israel from Egypt and their exile to Babylon as well as the journey of the early Christians from Jerusalem to Antioch were the most important experiences that shaped both of them in terms of their sense of identity and mission. I will focus on a specific similarity between the interviewees and a biblical story, that is the reconstruction of their identity as believers by rethinking the relationship between the universal and the local based on their outgoing experience. The theological resonance this fact evoked in me is related to the outgoing ecclesiology of Pope Francis.

Regarding the mission to Chinese international students, for me, a corresponding pastoral resonance is also a historical resonance, because in the history of the Church in China, Matteo Ripa (1682–1746), Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940), and the various missionary congregations have accompanied, cared for, and formed the Chinese students in Europe. Their examples compel me to reflect on how we can follow their footsteps today to respond to the needs of Chinese students in Europe with practical and appropriate pastoral actions. I think this is the fourth revolution in mission to Chinese overseas students, which is of important historical significance for the Church in China. To this end, this paper will first analyze the interviews about the five questions mentioned above; then follow the footsteps of Matteo Ripa, Vincent Lebbe, and the missionary congregations to express my pastoral and missionary resonance; and finally find the corresponding theological resonance in the Bible and Pope Francis' outgoing ecclesiology. This theological resonance is an overall reflection on the faith of Chinese Catholic youths studying abroad and the corresponding pastoral response, as well as on the relevance of both to the current situation of the Church in China.

8 Speaking of the task of the theologian, Claude Geffré says: "From the long tradition of Christianity, the theologian will seek to rediscover the fundamental experience of salvation offered by God in Jesus Christ, and his task will be to resituate this fundamental experience to which the texts of primitive Christianity bear witness, dissociating them from the representations and interpretations that belong to a world of experience that is now past" (Claude Geffré, *Croire et interpréter. Le tournant herméneutique de la théologie*, Paris: Cerf 2001, p. 17). What Geffré calls the "fundamental Christian experience" is the experience of the apostles' encounter with Jesus; to rediscover and resituate this fundamental experience is to allow people today to encounter the living Christ as the apostles did.

I. The Influence of European Society and Church on the Faith of Chinese Catholic Overseas Students

In order to ascertain whether and how European societies and churches have influenced the faith of Chinese Catholic students, it is necessary first to see the ways in which these Chinese Catholic students originally lived out their faith and expressed their Christian identity, then invite them to answer the above-mentioned question both positively and negatively. Finally they will be invited to reflect on whether such influences have altered or deepened their sense of Christian identity and mission.

1.1 The Ways by Which Chinese Catholic Overseas Students Live Out the Faith

Eight of the interviewees explicitly stated that their faith is not merely about attending mass or participating in religious activities such as public prayers. Rather, it is about integrating Christian principles into every aspect of their daily lives, and results in “subtle change of their life” (Paul), such as the way they get along with their friends. Sophia, a born Catholic said: “I express my faith through my daily life, and I talk to God about both positive and negative occurrences in my life.” Emma, also a born Catholic, does not go to church regularly, but she often reflects on whether her life has strayed far from God. John and Paul, two neophytes, said that their preferred method of expressing their faith is to serve and engage in dialogue with non-believers about their faith: “In serving and evangelizing others, I have a greater sense of Church, and I can improve myself both intellectually and spiritually.” (John)

It is noteworthy that four of the eight students were born in the 1990s, and were baptized as infants. One of them, Lucia, even deliberately avoids attending weekday masses, concerned that this might lead to a habit that would detract from the precious character of the Sunday liturgy – though her motivation is worthy of further discernment. Nevertheless, most Catholics, both those who were baptized at birth and neophytes, attend Sunday mass. Some neophytes have a profound appreciation for the liturgy. John, for instance, asserts that the mass, expressing sacrifice and resurrection, encapsulates the essence of the Christian faith, and it also immerses him into the history of Jesus as a participant rather than an observer.

We can distinguish two cases in terms of the way by which they deepen their faith.

Firstly, born Catholics who have devoted themselves to serve the Church by studying ecclesiastical disciplines are similar to neophytes in that, on the one hand, they understand the faith rationally by reading books and the Bible, and some of them even study theology for this purpose; on the other hand, they approach God through personal prayer, such as Katrina’s statement that she “desires to communicate with God interiorly.” In general, born Catholics are more familiar with the Church’s diverse prayer traditions, such as worship with songs, the breviary, contemplation, and adoration. But it is worth noting that they have almost completely eschewed the prayer tradition of the Church in China, namely the recitation of prayers, like the Litany of Saints. Mary, for instance, says: “I have been going to church with my family since I was a child, but I prefer to pray and communicate with God alone.”

Most of the neophytes are not familiar with the prayer traditions of the Church and had not learned and practiced any particular method of prayer. But this has allowed them to be more creative in their prayers. For example, Agnes says she does not have a set way or time to pray, but she engages in prayer according to her circumstances, discerning how God responds to her in different situations. For example, following a quarrel with a friend, she seeks guidance from God on the best course of action for reconciliation. She also enjoys short stays at various monasteries for doing retreat. John's method of prayer involves reading the Bible or theological texts; he tries to understand them in relation to his own experience, then attempting to apply their teachings to his own life. Subsequently, should he perceive an invitation to take action, he will endeavor to implement it. This, he says, "has constituted 60 percent of my life." Peter's experience is similar to that of John, yet it is articulated with greater depth. He elucidates his conversion in the following manner:

Before my baptism, I was just a sympathizer of Catholicism, agreeing with it on a philosophical and rational level. If I may use an analogy to illustrate, it is as if I had been on a mountain road, and even though I often passed by "God," I had always thought that it was just a gravestone, or at best the remains of a tall and imposing building from which I had only gleaned some intellectual insights from time to time. But after I asked myself if I wanted to become a Christian, the question suddenly became less of a question and more of an answer, because I suddenly realized that what God was showing me through everything that was happening in my life was not just letters in books written in ink, but a personal God who had feelings, who spoke to me, and who cared for me. Since then, I have often entered into prayer with fervor and have become very close to God, even though sometimes I find it difficult to overcome the deep darkness in each one's heart when interacting with people.

Peter does not describe a specific method of prayer, but when he says that God is a personal God who is "closely involved" in his life, who cares for him and loves him, it suggests that what he means by "prayer" is not constrained by a particular time or method of prayer, but rather a relationship with God throughout his life.

The second case concerns the born Catholics who are basically content with participation in the Sunday mass; their prayer is more mechanical. Sophia, for example, just recites a few prayers in the morning and evening; while some others do not pray personally, and their religious life is only limited to attending Sunday mass.

In summary, the younger generation of Chinese Catholic laypeople, born after the 1990s, both those baptized as infants and neophytes, is more aware of the interconnection between faith and life, and does not restrict their faith to solely religious activities. They show a growing emphasis on the personal dimension of faith, i.e., the personal relationship with God. In addition, they have basically broken away from the Church's tradition of reciting prayers in China, and have become more proactive and creative in their prayers. In conclusion, the faith of these young Chinese Catholics is more closely tied to daily life, is more personal, and is expressed in more creative ways. Only a few born Catholics, who are less active in deepening their understanding of and the way they live out their faith,

are still maintaining the traditional practices or relying on the tradition to maintain their faith.

1.2 The Positive Influence of European Society and Church on the Faith of Chinese Catholic Overseas Students

In this regard, the most common responses indicated that the free environment of European societies, its religious and cultural traditions, as well as the plurality within the Church helped to deepen their faith. The impact of freedom in European societies on their Christian identity can be considered from both subjective and objective perspectives. I will present just a few illustrative examples. Joseph, a born Catholic, speaking of subjective freedom, said that he became a “free-standing” or autonomous believer in Europe because he had been freed from the constraints of his family’s faith tradition. Paulina, another born Catholic, said:

The greater number of churches and Church activities in Europe has afforded me more opportunities to participate in such activities, which has increased my enthusiasm for faith. I feel that I have matured in my faith, listening to the sermons carefully, experiencing my relationship with Jesus, and I am more active and positive in my faith.

Whether one participates in Church activities freely or actively, it is a sign of maturity to personalize one’s faith. With regard to objective freedom, the students have two experiences. Firstly, they have freedom to participate in Church activities as mentioned by Paulina. Additionally, Emma observed that churches in Europe are conspicuous, mostly in the city centers, and easily accessible. John expressed his gratitude for being able to have confession at any time. Secondly, the religious freedom is respected. Joseph stated:

In Europe, the religious identity is not a source of concern, you do not perceive a threat to your identity when interacting with non-Christians, and thus, there is no need to worry about it. But this is not the case in China.

Agnes also said that in Europe, as a Christian, she feels that she is not an alien and does not need to justify the legitimacy of her faith. For Sophia, “Westerners are more open to religious diversity and rarely discriminate against believers of different religions.”

The positive impact of the Church in Europe on the faith of the Chinese Catholic overseas students was mainly due to the plurality of its forms. Joseph’s statement is more representative:

In Europe, there are many opportunities to come into contact with a variety of expressions of faith that are different from those of the Church in China, and especially with different ecclesial communities.

It is noteworthy that Joseph’s final point was also referenced by the other five young people. James was struck by the diverse ways in which the various religious orders and new communities live out their faith and fulfill their apostolic missions. In particular, the priests of these religious congregations make themselves available to communicate and interact with the youth individually. For example, a priest from the Emmanuel community helped

James a lot in his spiritual life. He feels that these religious congregations and new communities have created a spiritual culture, and through their mission of evangelization and service, he gains a deeper understanding of the Church.

However, three young people also said that they had no or very little contact with European churches; they are involved more in Chinese Catholic communities in Europe. Thus, Sophia, a born Catholic, said that she is unaware of the influence of the European Church on her way of believing; while Teresa, a neophyte, feels that “the Chinese Catholic communities in Europe are more approachable and can understand better her concerns than the European Churches.”

1.3 The Negative Influence of European Society and Church on the Faith of Chinese Catholic Overseas Students

The young people expressed three main concerns that cause difficulties and distress with regard to their faith: The first one pertains to language and culture; the second relates to the problems in European churches; and the third concerns the challenges brought by the Chinese Catholic communities and Chinese pastors in Europe. The difficulties encountered by some young people in integrating themselves into local churches are due to language and cultural barriers. Paulina, for instance, stated that she is “less interested in the activities of the local parish because she could not understand the local language and could not attend mass in depth.” James and Teresa, on the other hand, felt isolated, unable to find people and organizations that care about them and understand them.

In the eyes of these young Chinese Catholics, there are two main problems in European Churches. Firstly, they perceive a tendency towards excessive institutionalization. Secondly, they identify a strong alignment between the Church and political ideologies. They feel that the organizational structure of the Church in Europe is too mechanical and rigid, exhibiting a notable absence of human warmth. Angeles provided the example of numerous churches that are frequently closed and where the priests appear to be merely going to work, as though their work is akin to any other profession. Lucia observed that some remunerated personnel within the ecclesial institutions lack an attitude of service and evangelization.

Three young people expressed their regret that the Church in Europe is generally dominated by strong political ideologies: religious conservatives are often on the far right of the political spectrum, while religious progressives or reformers frequently appear to be on the far left. They pointed out that significant ideological conflicts are present within the various ecclesial media outlets, websites, publications, etc. One of them used to study theology in a certain European country, but because he could not tolerate the pervasive atmosphere of ideological disputes with his faculty of theology, and felt that the Catholicism in Europe is unduly politicized and secularized, he finally chose to continue his studies in another country.

The interviewed students identified two main challenges that the Chinese Catholic communities in Europe bring to them. Firstly, most of them said that the majority of the Chinese Catholic communities in Europe are far from providing adequate services for both Catholic and non-Christian Chinese students. They feel that the Chinese priests in general do not speak the same language as the students, especially the more highly edu-

cated ones. Most of the Chinese Catholic communities have devoted their efforts to taking care of the small Chinese traders, mainly from Wenzhou and Fujian, who are generally poorly educated. These small traders are basically traditional Catholics, and have maintained the Chinese Catholic tradition. The younger generation of overseas students cannot appreciate and integrate into their culture. Another challenge is that in one place where there are many Chinese priests, nuns, and lay students, several lay women have experienced verbal and emotional sexual harassment by some Chinese priests.

It is somewhat surprising that all the interviewees, regardless of whether they had direct experience with the Church scandals or merely heard about them, had not been driven away from the Church or cooled down in their faith. This is probably related to their attitude of personalizing their faith, as mentioned earlier, as well as to Confucius' teaching: "When you meet a good man, try to become his equal; when you see something bad in others, try to do self-reflection."⁹ Paulina, for instance, said: "The scandals perpetrated by clergy do not affect my personal faith, as my faith is my personal relationship with God." Mary also stated that she does not like to make moral judgments about others and prefers to focus on her own issues. Lucia and Katrina had the experience of "demystifying" the clergy. They felt that by recognizing their weaknesses, they could treat the clergy as ordinary human beings. This allowed them to learn to forgive and to discern God's will in history, particularly in challenging circumstances. Initially, John was skeptical about the truthfulness of the Church due to a scandal that had occurred in the diocese where he studied, but a spiritual experience released him: Once he passed a church where Eucharistic adoration and confessions were taking place, he expressed his anguish over the scandal to the priest who was hearing confessions. In response, the priest, pointing to the ostensorium, said to him: "The Church is of Christ." This prompted a profound shift in John's view of the Church' scandals, as he felt his eyes open and his heart at peace.

1.4 The Chinese Catholic Overseas Students' Awareness of Their Chinese Christian Identity and Mission

Based on the answers to the previous two questions, the majority of the students stated that while Europe has greater religious freedom, it is more pluralistic and secularized, and that Christians constitute a minority tolerated more or less by the European society. Consequently, as Christians in China and Europe, these Chinese students recognized their distinct position within the majority. In Europe, their sense of Christian identity is stronger because of their reinforced "double" minority identity – member of the universal Church and Chinese Catholic – as Sophia put it in a more representative way:

I was very proud to be a Chinese Catholic in Europe. Since my arrival in Europe, I have become acutely aware of my identity as a Chinese Christian, and I feel that I am a "representative" of the Church in China. Therefore, I especially realized that I have a strong desire to speak out for the Church in China in Europe; and it was a very special feeling to hold the Chinese flag at the World Youth Day.

9 Wu Guozhen, *A New Annotated English Version of the Analects of Confucius*, Fuzhou: Fujian Education Publishing House 2015, chapter 4: "Neighborhood," p. 119.

In addition to the fact that the recognition of their minority status within the society serves to reinforce their sense of identity as Christians, the positive and negative influence of European society and the Church on their faith is another factor that strengthens their sense of Christian identity. This sense of identity is mainly manifested in a more profound personalization of the faith. For the born Catholics, having distanced themselves from their family's faith tradition and the Chinese model of the Church, they have made their faith a free choice. The neophytes, whether baptized in China or abroad, are able to express their faith more freely in an environment where the religious identity is more respected. This freedom to choose and express one's own faith implies an inner and authentic personal recognition of the faith. Such recognition enables students to discern what is true and what is wrong in the Church. Consequently, they are able to untie the substance of faith from political ideologies and the human frailty of the ecclesiastics. Once the substance and the ideal of the faith are grasped, students can readily create their own ways of practicing the faith. This ability to complement one's personal faith by learning from others and to renew one's faith is the consequence of the interplay between the local and the universal, between traditions and new things. It is also a witness to the catholicity of the Church.

It follows that the outgoing experience as an encounter with a different way of seeing and living faith in a new environment can prompt a reevaluation of one's existing ways of believing. Following this reevaluation, one may choose to make adjustments to his or her faith in order to reorient oneself or reestablish his or her Christian identity and create appropriate personal ways of believing.

The reconstruction of Christian identity is accompanied by a reappraisal of mission, for the reconstruction of identity is not only a rediscovery of oneself, but also a renewal of the way of living one's faith, of which mission is a part. It is important to note that these students' increased sense of Christian mission is also related to the integration of their faith and life. James, for instance, said: "Life is about bearing witness to Christ, that is, showing others what Christ means to me, especially in the Chinese context." Emma aspires to make God better known through her life. And John's sense of mission motivates him to talk about God with those around him. The students enrolled in ecclesiastical disciplines are learning to live their faith more fully or to lead more meaningful lives through their studies. Additionally, they have articulated a desire to utilize their learning to serve the Church, especially the Church in China. To this end, some of them took advantage of their vacation time to offer services to the Church of their hometown. Others expressed their willingness to use their respective specialities, such as philosophy and literature, to spread the Christian faith. Paul, for example, has a plan to compose a novel on the subject of faith. For this purpose, he traveled to Japan to gather material. His intention is to mitigate the current Chinese people's animosity through the introduction of the faith of Japanese Catholics, particularly their experience of forgiveness. It is interesting to note that when it comes to the Christian mission, their primary focus is the contribution that they can make as Chinese to the Church in China and to Chinese society. Their willingness to contribute to the Church in China and the manner in which they do so are shaped by their interactions with European societies and churches, as well as the specialization they gained from their studies. This illustrates the consistency of their sense of Chinese Christian identity

and mission, which reflects the catholicity and the oneness between the universal and the local in the ecclesiological sense.

II. A Pastoral Response: The Fourth Revolution in Mission to Chinese Overseas Students

2.1 The Needs of Chinese Catholic Students in Europe

The negative impact of European society and Church on Chinese overseas students shows that the reconstruction of the Christian identity is accompanied by doubts, struggles, and challenges. Therefore, in this process they need accompaniment and help. The fifth question of my interview with them manifests this need:

What would you like the Chinese Catholic communities in Europe or other Catholic organizations which can serve the Chinese in Europe to do in order to help you to deepen your faith?

There were twelve students who mentioned that they need a Catholic youth group so as to find partners in the faith who are of the same age, and in order to deepen their faith through sharing and friendship. They suggested three concrete activities: first, to learn and know the faith better (4 people), and to learn spirituality and prayer (another 4 people); second, to have a retreat – all the young people said a retreat would be necessary; third, a summer camp for creating friendship (suggested by 2 people).

Besides this, there were two who felt a need for spiritual accompaniment or a spiritual director. Three wished that Chinese pastors could accompany them, but they hope that they could communicate with these pastors in a congenial way, in equality (and not in the spirit of clericalism), and in a non-institutionalised relationship.

Finally there were another three who hoped that the Chinese Catholic communities could interact more with the local churches, so as to help the youth to integrate themselves into the European society and Church.

To sum up, these needs of the students address the twofold results of “interculturalization,”¹⁰ namely the inculturation of the gospel and the evangelization of the culture, as well as the twofold integration of local and foreign cultures. The wish to establish Catholic youth groups shows that these overseas students have a sense of belonging to the Church of their home, and it also manifests their efforts to evangelize the culture – to deepen their faith by learning more about the faith and spirituality and through spiritual accompaniment. Their effort to integrate into European society and the European Church is at the same time a process of integrating their already culturally shaped (Sinicized) faith in a new culture, and of re-expressing their faith through this new culture – inculturation of the gospel.

10 See my forthcoming book, *Interculturalization: A Theology of Mission in A Synodal Perspective* (Wenhua huhua – gongyi tongxing shiye xia de shiming shenxue 文化互化—共議同行視野下的使命神學), Center for Philosophical and Theological Studies, Department of Philosophy, Fu Jen Catholic University, “Disputationes de antiquis et modernis” book series, no. 5, Taipei: Chinese Christian Literature 2025.

2.2 The First Three Revolutions in Mission to Chinese Overseas Students

What should we do, and what can we do in response to the faith situation and needs of these Catholic Chinese overseas students? Or what kind of pastoral “resonance” could we develop? Before talking about the pastoral “resonance,” I feel the need to discuss a kind of historical “resonance,” because in the history of the Catholic Church in China there were already three periods when overseas students in Europe received help. I think that these helps can be called “revolutions in mission to Chinese overseas students.” By “revolutions” I mean that the three periods were marked by dramatic changes within the Church in China, and these missionary actions transformed the fate of the Church in China in a profound way, as they had a huge impact on its development.

The first revolution was the Collegium Sinicum founded in Naples in 1732 by Matteo Ripa, where he strove to educate Chinese missionaries for China. The second revolution was launched by Vincent Lebbe who in the years from 1920–1927 cared for the Chinese overseas students in Belgium and France. The third revolution have been the efforts of various missionary congregations to help and support overseas studies of Chinese sisters, seminarians, and priests in the years since the 1990s. I think that the calling in our new age is to help lay Catholics studying in Europe. This fourth missionary revolution is the task of the overseas churches and of those communities who can help in overseas regions. This article is not a historical study, thus I will not give a detailed account of the first three missionary revolutions; they are only a way to highlight the special features and the historical meaning of the fourth missionary revolution regarding the Chinese overseas students.

Matteo Ripa belonged to the missionary congregation of Mary the Pure (Congregazione di Maria della Purità dei Preti secolari Missionari).¹¹ He reached China in 1710 and left in 1723. He served as painter at the court in Beijing. While he was in China, he realized that “the vast regions of China need more workers, and Europe cannot provide enough people.”¹² Therefore he felt the need to educate local Chinese missionaries who could evangelize the population of the lower classes. In the year 1723 he took four Chinese seminarians (Gu Wenyao, aged 23, Yin Ruowang, aged 19, Huang Batong, aged 12, and Wu Lujue, aged 13) and their Chinese teacher Wang Yajing back to Italy, where he began to found the Collegium Sinicum. In the proposal letter he wrote to Pope Benedict XIII, he gave these reasons for establishing the seminary: native missionaries would better understand Chinese culture, thus they could better enter the society, easily communicate with the people, and in times of persecution they would not be as easily discovered as the

11 Some scholars (Li Tiangang 李天綱, “Liyi zhi zheng’: Kang Qian shidai de shijieshi yiyi” “禮儀之爭”: 康乾時代的世界史意義, in: Li Tiangang 李天綱, *Ta wenhua quanshi: jingchang yu shenxue de xiangyu* 跨文化詮釋: 經常與神學的相遇, Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe 新星出版社 2007, p. 213; Liu Yaxuan 劉亞軒, “Qing chu lai Hua chuanjiaoshe Ma Guoxian yanjiu” 清初來華傳教士馬國賢研究, doctoral dissertation, Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue Zhongguo gudaishi yanjiusuo 浙江大學中國古代史研究所 2009, p. 7) say that he belonged to the Order of Pious Workers (Ordine dei Pii Lavoratori), but according to the research done by Shi Yani, Ripa never joined the order founded by his spiritual advisor, see Shi Yani 施亞霓, “Ma Guoxian fu Hua: liyi zhi zheng yu tianzhujiao zai Hua weiji” 馬國賢赴華: 禮儀之爭與天主教在華危機, in: *Shizhe: Dongwu daxue Lishi xi yanjiusheng xuebao* 史轍: 東吳大學歷史系研究生學報, 2016, no. 12, p. 50.

12 Matteo Ripa, *Storia Della Fondazione Della Congregazione E Del Collegio De Cinesi*, parte prima, Napoli 1832, p. 496.

foreigners. Thus they would enjoy better conditions for the work of evangelization.¹³ After some negotiations and frustrations, Fr. Ripa finally established the Collegium Sinicum in Naples on 25 July 1732. It was a seminary dedicated to educate Chinese priests and missionaries. Until 1868, when it was confiscated by the unified Italian government, the college had educated 106 Chinese seminarians.¹⁴ They made an immense contribution to the evangelization work in China and also to the intercultural exchange with the West (translation work, participation in the edition of bilingual dictionaries etc.). Especially during the persecution period of the reign of Yongzheng (1724–1735), when foreign missionaries were hardly able to do mission work in China, the college in Naples preserved and prepared native clergy resources for the Church in China.

Different from Matteo Ripa's education of Chinese clergy in a college was Vincent Lebbe's work in Europe. After the so-called "Laoxikai Incident,"¹⁵ when Lebbe had a conflict with his Vincentian superiors and returned to Europe in 1920, he devoted himself to the care of lay Catholic overseas students in Europe and to the evangelization of non-believer Chinese overseas students. It was the time when the "movement to study and work in France" (Mouvement Travail-Études) was popular. Many young people from China studied in Europe. Thus the general superior of the MEP (Parisian missionaries), Archbishop Jean de Guébriant, asked Fr. Lebbe to serve as pastor of the Chinese overseas students in France and Belgium. Therefore in 1923 Lebbe established the "Catholic Action of Chinese Youth" (Actio Catholica Juventis Sinensis) and together with his assistant Fr. André Boland developed their work from France to Belgium (Louvain). In Louvain this youth group published the periodical *Bulletin de la jeunesse catholique chinoise*.

The obvious aim of this association was to make sure that Christianity could slowly but effectively influence the Chinese elite. In order to support this movement and to financially help the Chinese students in Europe, Fr. Vincent Lebbe also founded, with the collaboration of some priests¹⁶ and with the support of Belgian and French traders, the associations called Amitiés Belgo-Chinoises and Amitiés Franco-Chinoises.¹⁷

These two associations were not exclusively addressing Catholic youth. They were open to all Chinese students, mainly in order to help them with school fees, lodging, and other living needs.¹⁸ Under the influence and inspiration of Fr. Lebbe, his friend Fr. Boland

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- 13 Matteo Ripa, *Storia Della Fondazione Della Congregazione E Del Collegio De Cinesi*, parte prima, Napoli 1832, pp. 207-209.
- 14 See Fang Hao 方豪, *Fang Hao wenlu* 方豪文錄, Beijing: Shangzhi bianyiguan 上智編譯館 1948, p. 185. As to the name list of the 106 men, see Gianni Criveller, "The Chinese Priests of the College of Naples and the Promotion of the Indigenous Clergy (18th–19th Century)," in: Philip Vanhaelemeersch – Rachel Lu Yan (eds.), *Silent Force: Native Converts in the Catholic China Mission*, Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Institute 2009, pp. 181-183.
- 15 Cf. Jacques Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance: The Life of Père Lebbe*, translated by George Lamb, London: Sheed & Ward 1958, pp. 146-152.
- 16 It was mainly Fr. Boland.
- 17 Olivier Lardinois, "L'actualité du père Vincent Lebbe. Le point de vue d'un missionnaire belge à Taiwan," in: Arnaud Join-Lambert – Paul Servais – Chung Heng Shen – Eric De Payen (eds.), *Vincent Lebbe et son héritage*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain 2017, p. 203.
- 18 Cf. Pan Zhiyuan, "Inculturation at Home: The Belgian Catholic Project for Chinese Students (1920–1930s)," in: *Religions* 15 (2024) 3, p. 5: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030327> (accessed on July 17, 2024).

continued the service for Chinese overseas students after Lebbe had returned to China in 1927. In the same year Boland founded the “Foyer Catholique Chinois,” with the aim to

*establish in all Belgium and especially in Louvain centers for Chinese students and seminaries, and to offer basic philosophical and theological training in order to support the missionaries in China.*¹⁹

In order to realize Lebbe’s dream of a native Church based on native missionaries in 1930 Fr. Boland founded the Société des Auxiliaires des Missions, S.A.M. Its special aim was to train and help foreign priests who could serve Chinese bishops in China, and to care for the Chinese students in Europe.²⁰ All in all, because of the efforts of Fr. Boland and of

*Fr. Lebbe, around 400 or 500 Chinese students graduated from schools in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Netherlands. These students later worked in different areas such as culture, industry and commerce, and the Catholic Church respectively where they were entrusted with important tasks and made an immense contribution to China.*²¹

The third missionary revolution regarding Chinese overseas students began in the 1990s. After the “Reform and Modernization Policy” (after 1978), seminaries in China were slowly reopened or established starting from the early 1980s. Bishop Joseph Gan Junqiu has divided the development of Chinese seminaries into three periods: “A period of pastoral praxis, a period of regular theological education, and a period of academic work.”²² The 1980s and 1990s were the period of pastoral praxis.²³ Because it was necessary to deal with a gamut of problems in those years,

*the emphasis of theological education in the seminaries was on spirituality; the older generation could not properly transmit their knowledge to the younger generation; there was a great need of priests, thus practical education was the most important issue.*²⁴

Therefore it was only in the early 1990s that the Church in China began to send young priests, seminarians, and sisters abroad for studies. They were helped by the missionary

19 André Boland, *Rapport à l'Assemblée Générale du 24 Septembre 1929 et Status de l'Association*, Bruges: Des Presses de l'Abbaye de Saint André, September 24, 1929, in Leuven: Archief Sint Andriesabdij Zevenkerken. KADOC.

20 Cf. Gabriel Banyangira Rusagara, “La Société des Auxiliaires des Missions (S.A.M.), de 1926 à 1940: Des Prêtres Occidentaux au Service des Évêques Autochtones (Chinois),” thèse doctorale, Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain 2020.

21 See Lei Mingyuan shenfu congshu bianjizu 雷鳴遠神父叢書編輯組, *Lei Mingyuan shenfu shenghuo lüeying* 雷鳴遠神父生活掠影, Taizhong: Tianzhujiao Yao Han xiao xiongdi hui 天主教耀漢小兄弟會 1990, p. 31.

22 See Gan Junqiu 甘俊邱, “Dangdai Zhongguo tianzhujiao shenxue jiaoyu yu wenhua jiangou” 當代中國天主教神學教育與文化建構 (conference paper), Furen daxue Tianzhujiao xueshu yanjiuyuan di jiu jie tianzhujiao guoji xueshu yantaohui – Tianzhujiao daxue jingshen yu lixiang ji qi lishi fazhan yu xianshi 輔仁大學天主教學術研究院第九屆天主教國際學術研討會—天主教大學精神與理想及其歷史發展與現實, Taipei, May 4–5, 2018, p. 34: www.fuho.fju.edu.tw/sketch/writing/20180504-2.pdf (accessed on July 21, 2024).

23 Bishop Gan thinks that from the 1990s to the year 2013 was the period of regular theological training, and following the “two methods” in 2013, the period of academic work began. The “two methods” denotes the policies announced by the Bureau of Religious Affairs in November 2012, which were in effect since January 2013, namely the “Method of Ascertaining the Qualifications of Teachers in Religious Colleges and Seminaries,” and the “Method of Bestowing Academic Degrees in Religious Colleges and Seminaries.” See *ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

congregations of different nations, for example the MEP (Parisian Missions) in France, the SVD (Divine Word Missionaries) in Germany, the CICM (Scheut Fathers) in Belgium, the Columbans in Ireland, the Maryknollers in the USA, the Jesuits in Taiwan, and the Propaganda Fide in Italy. There are also many new communities and diocesan seminaries, for example the Neocatechumenate, the Opus Dei, the Mother of Life and several diocesan seminaries in France and Spain which have supported the studies and the life of Chinese overseas students. There are also many Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters studying in the Philippines and in Korea. It is a pity that until today there is neither comprehensive statistical research concerning the Chinese priests, sisters, and seminarians who studied abroad,²⁵ nor research concerning the history of this period of study abroad. However, we can say with certainty that the number of Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters,

25 In his conference paper Bp. Gan Junqiu provides two data: "According to a statistical survey in 2003, there were already more than one hundred priests who had studied in the USA, Italy, France, Germany, Belgium, Korea, and other countries" (Chen Jianming 陳建明, "Xiuyuan jiaoyu ershi nian jian ji" 修院教育二十年簡輯, in: *Zhongguo tianzhujiao* 中國天主教 2003, no. 5, p. 48); and "from 1991 to 2017 the Maryknollers in the USA have trained 138 Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters coming from more than 40 dioceses" (Gan Junqiu, "Dangdai Zhongguo tianzhujiao shenxue jiaoyu yu wenhua jiangou," p. 43, note 15). According to my own preliminary survey on Doctors of Philosophy (PhDs) and Doctors of Sacred Theology (STDs) from China Mainland, there are today 71 PhDs/STDs, among them 17 lay Catholics (11 of them are teaching in Chinese universities or colleges). Of course, these are only the PhDs that I personally know; the actual number must be far higher, and there are many PhD students who will graduate in the near future.

Disciplines	PhD/STD		Total
Systematic theology (dogmatics, fundamental theology, religious science)	Priests	14	20
	Sisters	1	
	Lay Catholic men	1	
	Lay Catholic women	4	
Biblical exegesis, Biblical theology	Priests	12	16
	Sisters	1	
	Female Lay Catholics	3	
Canon law	Priests	6	7
	Sisters	1	
Moral theology	Priests	5	6
	Female lay Catholics	1	
Church history	Priests	2	6
	Sisters	2	
	Male lay Catholics	1	
	Female lay Catholics	1	
Practical theology (missiology, pastoral theology, catechesis, etc.)	Priests	2	5
	Sisters	3	
Liturgy	Priests	2	4
	Sisters	1	
	Female lay Catholics	1	
Spirituality	Priests	1	4
	Female lay Catholics	3	
Patristics	Priests	1	3
	Male lay Catholics	1	
	Female lay Catholics	1	

who received education abroad, run into thousands, and most of them obtained an MA, because most of them went directly for MA studies after leaving China, or they began as undergraduate students and pursued a Master's degree. These Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters who returned from abroad are/were doubtless the core force which can/could develop the Church in China, and they reconnected the Church in China after 1978 with the universal Church.

2.3 The Fourth Revolution in Mission to Chinese Overseas Students

Now is the time to turn attention to the education of laypeople who study abroad, which would be the fourth revolution in mission to Chinese overseas students. There are four reasons for this: 1. The situation of priests and sisters who returned to China from abroad and have been engaging in the intellectual apostolate is far from ideal. 2. A rapid decline of vocations in China, and a younger generation who want to dedicate their lives often chose the way of “laying back and relaxing” (*tang ping* 躺平). 3. The significant influence of urbanization on the Church in China. 4. The role of the laity and their advantages.

As to the first reason: Although priests and sisters who studied abroad made a good contribution to the Church in China, their work in culture and academic apostolate is far from ideal. As our survey shows, about 65% (11 out of 17) of the lay Catholics who hold PhD/STD in ecclesiastical disciplines work in universities in China and do academic work, but most of the returned priests and sisters do pastoral work. Bishop Gan Junqiu divides them into the two patterns of pastoral model and academic model:

Most of the priests and sisters who returned from studies abroad belong to the pastoral model, after receiving an MA they have been serving in parishes or other institutions, and later they often lack an academic platform or lack the ability for studies, and so they limit themselves to pastoral work. There are only a few PhDs, and among them, there are even less belonging to the academic model. Most of those do academic work in seminaries or some other research institutions.²⁶

This phenomenon can be attributed to both subjective and objective factors. The subjective causes are lack of academic potential, intellectual horizons, interest, the intellectual climate and tradition of the college where they graduated, etc. In these last years I have cooperated with most of the Chinese Catholic PhDs in ecclesiastical disciplines due to publication work, and I have discovered that many priests and sisters do not have a good basic education, especially in terms of the Chinese literature – it is hard for most of them to intelligibly and correctly write in Chinese. Moreover, the academic horizon of priests and sisters who graduated from ecclesial colleges in certain regions is rather narrow, there is a large gap in their academic level and that of secular universities. It is very seldom that PhDs/STDs who graduated from these colleges would publish articles in high level academic journals which undergo the peer review system. The objective reasons are that there are only very few academic platforms in the Church in China. Because of their religious status, priests and sisters are forbidden to teach at secular universities, thus most of them

²⁶ See Gan Junqiu, “Dangdai Zhongguo tianzhujiao shenxue jiaoyu yu wenhua jiangou,” p. 43.

can only do pastoral work. Even so, I think that the subjective causes are the main causes, because there are several outstanding scholars who live under the same conditions and still managed to publish a considerable amount of academic works, such as Zhao Jianmin 趙建敏, Chen Kaihua 陳開華, Tian Weishuai 田煒帥, Liu Jinping 劉晉平, Cao Youchen 曹友臣, Rong Lina 戎利娜, Xiao Enhui 蕭恩慧, Xie Hua 謝華, etc. Among the Catholic scholars from Mainland China who managed to do academic work abroad are Jing Baolu 靖保祿, Sun Xuyi 孫旭義 from Li Madou Study Center, Geng Zhanhe 耿占河 from the Holy Spirit Seminary of Hong Kong and Cui Baochen 崔寶臣 from Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine. Rev. Cui was recently nominated rector of this faculty – the first non-Jesuit rector.

It is noteworthy that the climax of interest among Chinese clergy, sisters, and seminarians in studying abroad has already passed; the number of students going to different countries for studies is dropping.²⁷ This is related to the second reason for supporting the fourth revolution in mission to Chinese overseas students: on the one hand, the number of vocations in mainland China is experiencing a precipitous decline;²⁸ and on the other hand, an attitude of “laying back and relaxing” (*tang ping*) prevails among those born in the 1990s or after 2000.²⁹

The third reason is urbanization, a much debated topic, which has a deep impact on the Church in China.³⁰ The three characteristics of the Catholic Church in China have been “villages, women, and illiterates.” But times are changing, economy and technology have developed rapidly, and only within a few decades, China has been transformed from isolated agricultural country into a modern, industrialized, urbanized, and open society. In 1980, China’s urban population was only 19.39%, but in 2023 it was 66.2%.³¹ This naturally

27 A comparison between the years 2013 and 2023 may show the difference a decade can make: In 2013 the MEP supported more than 10 priests and sisters to study in France, but in 2023 they were only 3. In 2013 there were more than 100 Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters in Rome for studies, but in 2023 they were around 50. The situation in other places in Europe is similar.

28 According to a research by Dr. Anthony Lam from the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, “the overall number of seminarians in the different seminaries dropped from 2470 in 2002 to 485 in 2018.” “The age distribution of sisters in China is not very different from the clergy: those born after the 1960s: 20%, after 1970s: 45%, after 1980s: 30%, after the 1990s: 5%. It is obvious that there are no more sisters born before the 1960s, that most are born from the period of the ‘after 1960s’ to the ‘after 1980s’, and only 5% are between 20 and 30 years old (born after the 1990s).” See Anthony Lam, “Prospects for the ‘One-Generation Church’ in Contemporary China,” in: *Tripod* 39 (2019) 195, pp. 42-43.

29 According to a friend of mine who teaches in different seminaries in mainland China, in general the current study attitude and sense of mission of the younger seminarians are very different from those born in the 1970s and 1980s; the seminarians today are less enthusiastic. The older generation had experienced the reforms and beginning developments and came from a poorer condition, so they were used to accept challenges and difficulties; they had hard working spirit and longed to obtain knowledge abroad. The younger ones are afraid of suffering in foreign countries, and they fear that after returning to China they cannot do anything with what they have learned abroad. They have opportunities to go easily abroad as tourists, and can obtain knowledge through the internet. Consequently, their desire to go abroad for studies is not great.

30 The earliest discussion about the impact of urbanization on the Church in China was the conference “Urbanization and the Care for Migrants” organized by Xinde Culture Research Center (信德文化研究所) on September 10–12, 2013 in Shijiazhuang. The journal *Tripod* recently published some articles which discussed the same issue. See *Tripod* 2020, No. 197: <https://hsstudyc.org.hk/product/tripod197/> (accessed on July 21, 2024).

31 Cf. C. Textor, “Urbanization in China 1980–2023,” in: *Statista*, January 17, 2024: www.statista.com/statistics/270162/urbanization-in-china/ (accessed on July 21, 2024).

impacted on the rural Churches: Many Catholics in the villages left and migrated to the cities, for example

*Er Quan Jing Parish in Zhangbei district, Hebei Province, had 1,500 Catholics, but today only 200 are left. Zhangzhuang parish in the Wei district, Hebei Province, has lost three fifths of the Catholics in the last three decades, since they all work in the cities and left their homes. Honggou Parish in Taiyuan Diocese, Shanxi Province, had several thousand believers, but today only several hundred are left. Nanchuan Parish in Chongqing Diocese is located in the suburbs of Chongqing, it had 2,000 Catholics before, but today fewer than 500 are left.*³²

The loss of Catholics in the rural regions is serious, and there are structural problems when so many Catholics migrate to the cities. Moreover, the whole Church in China faces the enormous task of handling an urban culture centered on knowledge, progress, modernity, and openness, but it lacks pastoral skills and methods. We read in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council), that the Church should respond to the contemporary questions, she should be in dialogue with all humanistic and social sciences of the modern world, she should participate in social life, should enforce social projects, promote the progress of culture, should protect human rights, should preserve peace in the world, then the Catholic Church in China can only feel that with its conditions and scarce resources today, it can do very little despite its ambitious dreams.

In a sense, the three problems mentioned above are an “outgoing” or “displacement” (*déplacement*) experience of the Church in China: from returning home with dreams of academic success to facing the reality of being unable to unfold one’s potential, this is an ideal displacement. From the abundance of vocations to the scarcity of vocations, from the opening of seminaries to the closing of seminaries, from the popularity of overseas studies to a lack of attraction, this is a historical displacement. From villages to cities, from concentrated crowds of Catholics to individuals living in a diaspora situation, this is a structural displacement. All these displacements, be it from the view of individual feelings, or be it from the point of society and history, they are all a kind of “outgoing” movement, and it is necessary that individual believers and the ecclesial community find their identity again.

We see that the experience of studying abroad as a kind of leaving home can accelerate the reconstruction of the identity of lay Catholics. What is the correlation between the process of reconstruction of Chinese overseas students’ identity and the outgoing experience based on which the Church in China is reconstructing its identity? I think that the reconstruction of the identity of the Church in China and the formation of lay people, especially the formation of overseas lay students, has an important correlation. This correlation not only has a social and historical dimension, but also has a theological and ecclesial dimension. In the third part of this article I will give a more detailed account of the latter. The former is what I have defined as the fourth reason for the fourth revolution

32 See Zhang Wenxi, “Pastoral Reflection on the Impact of Urbanization on Chinese Christians,” in: *Tripod* 33 (2013) 171, p. 6.

in mission to the Chinese overseas students, and this is also an overall response to the first three reasons.

As to the position of laypeople in the Church, from the Second Vatican Council to the synod of synodality, large amounts of relevant documents and studies have been published, which I do not need to repeat here. However, the advantages of laypeople should be emphasized once more, because it is a complementary element to the three questions mentioned above. In a time when the number of Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters studying abroad is decreasing, the number of Chinese lay Catholics who pursue their studies in ecclesiastical disciplines abroad for the sake of faith and for serving the Church is increasing greatly. As far as I know, in 2024, there are around twenty Chinese laypeople who study dogmatic theology, biblical exegesis, moral theology, liturgy and Church history in Europe. It is worth noting that those Chinese Catholic students who study disciplines not related to the Church have scholarships or family support, thus they do not have financial problems. But almost all of those who study ecclesiastical disciplines have financial problems for studying and living. And the ecclesial communities and pastors very seldom show concern for them. Most of the ecclesiastical institutions in Europe give scholarships only to priests, seminarians and sisters, very few of them give scholarships to laypeople.³³ However, the potential and education level of these laypeople are generally higher than those of the priests and sisters. In order to deepen their faith and serve the Church, they have chosen to study ecclesiastical disciplines which do not have a great future in China, their motivation and spirit of dedicating themselves to God are not inferior to the religious people and the clergy. If they later can serve in society, for example in a university, it would be beneficial for the development of the Church in China. Also, they can use their professional knowledge to serve the Church. In a situation of lack of vocations and ever more serious urbanization, the Church in China must rely on young laypeople who received a good education and have a global vision. At the same time, the more free and resourceful ecclesial communities abroad are an ideal place to train and form them. Even the laypeople who do not learn ecclesiastical disciplines, if they can receive better formation in faith, can also assist the Church in many ways. For me, these are the signs of the times, and it is an opportunity for the future development of the Church in China.

Therefore, this fourth revolution in mission to Chinese overseas students needs the help of missionary congregations and of the other ecclesiastical communities and foundations in Europe. It also needs the concern and care of the Chinese priests in Europe, who should pay more attention to the above mentioned needs of these laypeople, so as to train them to be able to spread the faith to the non-Christian overseas students from China, and in the future become the mainstay in the service of the Church. If the help which different missionary congregations have extended to Chinese priests and sisters studying abroad

33 As far as I know, today (2024) the Parisian Missions (MEP) have supported one lay person to obtain brilliantly a PhD in biblical studies from the Catholic University of Paris. The Verbiest Foundation in Belgium is also helping one lay person in his PhD studies in patristics at the Catholic University of Louvain. Likewise, the Dominicans helped five or six Chinese lay Catholics studying at the Angelicum in Rome. And the Chinese Province of the Society of Jesus supported and continues to support laypeople in their studies at the Fu Jen Faculty of theology of St. Robert Bellarmine and MA or PhD studies at the Gregorian University. The Chinese Jesuits have also begun in 2023 to organize annual retreats for Chinese lay Catholics studying in Europe, in these two years altogether nearly 60 young people participated in the retreats.

has been a continuation of the mission strategy of Matteo Ripa, then the fourth revolution in mission to the Chinese overseas students can be seen as the continuation of Vincent Lebbe's strategy of evangelization. In fact, this is exactly what the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)* teaches:

They [laypeople] live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. [...] Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth. (31-33)

In order to live out laypeople's mission of evangelization, the Second Vatican Council says

it is to be hoped that many of the laity will receive a sufficient formation in the sacred sciences, and that some will dedicate themselves professionally to these studies, developing and deepening them by their own studies. In order that they may fulfill their function, let it be recognized that all the faithful, whether clerics or laity, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought and of expressing their mind with humility and fortitude in those matters on which they enjoy competence. (Gaudium et spes, 62).

III. A Theology of "Outgoing" in the Light of Peter's Acceptance of the Gentiles and the Establishment of the Catholicity of the Church

What resonance does the aforementioned faith situation of Chinese Catholic youth studying in Europe and the current situation of the Church in China have with the Bible and theology? We cannot stop at observing and solving the problems. We also need to explore the more fundamental theological significance of this phenomenon, including the whole pastoral response. This is because the issues of faith and the Church are not only social problems that can be dealt with in a human way, but also require discernment and compliance with God's vision. As a source of illumination, revelation, and guidance, His vision on all things has been revealed in the Bible. The universal and permanent significance of the Bible lies in the fact that God has always been able to use its content to speak realistically to people and events of today. The condition for resonance between current situations and the Bible is the homology of situations. In this regard, Marc Donzé says:

What we call the "homology of situations" can be summed up in a few words. The Word of God is always situated within a particular context, which it illuminates, interprets, or transforms. The relationship between the situation and the Word is crucial for understanding its depth, function, and effect. How, for example, can we understand the Passover rite without taking into account its relationship with the Exodus and its role in the history of the Jewish people? In order to make recourse

*to the Word relevant today, the relationship between the Word and today's situation must be the same as the relationship between the Word and the situation in which it was spoken or written.*³⁴

In my opinion, the relationship between the experience of the Chinese Catholic overseas students and the Church in China and the construction of their identities can be compared to baptism of the Cornelius family by Peter and the transition of the early Church from Jerusalem to Antioch. This experience of the early Church allows us to look more deeply at the current problems of the Church in China in an ecclesiological perspective.

Prior to the martyrdom of Stephen, the early Christian community consisted only of Jewish believers centered in Jerusalem. Following the martyrdom of Stephen, due to generalized persecution, the followers of Jesus began to scatter to

Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus [...]. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Ac 11:19-20, 26)

The designation “Christian” was initially given to the Christians in the Hellenistic city Antioch, because the Christian community and its way of living were markedly distinct in that city. Even though it was first a bantering term, it served to make Christians aware of their difference. Chinese Catholic Overseas youth have a similar sense of being minority both at home³⁵ and in Europe. But what makes them more similar to the early Christians who came to Antioch is the impact of the outgoing experience on the construction of their identity.

Antioch was one of the largest Greek cities at the time, with a diverse population of Romans, Greeks, Syrians, and Jews, and was a multicultural, commercial, and religious centre. Some scholars posit that the population of Jews in the city may have reached 220,000-450,000 during the early Christian era.³⁶ As a foreign land for the early Christians, Antioch was somewhat similar to the pluralistic and liberal Europe in the eyes of today's Chinese Catholic students.

Upon arriving in Antioch, Judeo-Christians, who had previously interacted with Greeks and other Gentiles in Cyprus and Cyrene, naturally proceeded to proclaim the Gospel to the Greeks there. Therefore, it was neither Paul nor Peter who first proclaimed the Gospel to the Gentiles, but these Judeo-Christians of Cyprus and Cyrene. Perhaps it was because Paul saw what they were doing, and because he was provoked by the Jews' rejection of the Gospel, that Paul decided to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Ac 13:44-49).

Luke seems to have intended to utilize the narrative of Cornelius family's baptism by Peter as a means of justifying Paul's mission to the Gentiles.³⁷ He begins with the account

34 Marc Donzé, “Objectifs et tâches de la théologie pratique,” in: *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 69 (1995) 3, p. 299.

35 A generally atheistic country is like a foreign land for the Christians, even if it is their homeland.

36 Cf. Jerome Crowe, *From Jerusalem to Antioch: The Gospel Across Cultures*, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press 1997, p. 91.

37 Cf. Ian J. Elmer, “Between Jerusalem and Antioch: The Advent of the Gentile Mission,” in: *Australian eJournal of Theology*, February 2006, no. 6, pp. 2-3.

of Peter being guided by the Holy Spirit to baptize Cornelius' family (Ac 10); then describes Peter's defense of this act (Ac 11:1-18). Luke then goes on to tell the story of the Church of Antioch and Paul's mission towards the Gentiles (Ac 11:19-30; 13:1-52). Finally, he recounts a dispute between Judeo-Christians and Paul regarding this matter, followed by the Council of Jerusalem, during which Peter defends Paul based on his own experience (Ac 11:1-52).

In this structure, it is clear that, as the head of the Apostles and the leader of the early Church, Peter's role in baptizing the family of Cornelius is to pave the way for and justify Paul's mission towards the Gentiles. Nevertheless, this also reflects the authority and importance of Peter's act. For this reason, the biblical scholar Daniel Marguerat asserts that Peter's act was the summit of the entire *Acts of the Apostles*, as it opened the door of the Church to the Gentiles.³⁸ More precisely, it transformed the early Judeo-Christian community into the "Catholic" Church, which was a qualitative change in the identity of the Church.

It is worth noting that although Peter initially did not go out of Judaea to evangelize the Gentiles in places such as Antioch, his act of baptizing Cornelius' family and his authoritative defense of the mission of Paul and others during the Council of Jerusalem involved him in the wave of going out to evangelize the Gentiles. Consequently, he experienced a certain degree of "going out" for mission as well. The vision he had in Joppa (Ac 10:9-16) illustrates vividly his experience of encountering a foreign or different culture. The various "unclean" animals he had considered inedible according to Jewish tradition were not unclean in God's eyes. This vision meant that the Judeo-Christian community should be open to Gentiles and admit them into the Church. The subsequent baptism of Cornelius' family by Peter under the guidance of the Holy Spirit made the Church "Catholic" since then. It can be said, therefore, that the identity of the Catholic Church was established through the "outgoing experience." Similarly, the Chinese Catholic youth studying in Europe also had their identity as both Catholics of the universal Church and Chinese Catholics strengthened by their "outgoing experience." The Church in China, with its "outgoing experience" of diminishing vocations and urbanization, likewise needs to reposition itself in the new context and to reconstitute its identity as an ecclesial community.

This is not a social accident, but a theological necessity. Indeed, outgoing movement is not merely a condition for the construction of the Church and Christian identity; rather, it is the identity of the Church and of Christianity itself. In other words, the Church or Christians are essentially those who go out, establishing their identity in the process of going out. This is because God Himself is the One who goes out eternally. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Based on Thomas Aquinas' definition of love – "going out of oneself"³⁹ – Pope Francis explains the relationship between love and outgoing movement as follows:

In the depths of every heart, love creates bonds and expands existence, for it draws people out of themselves and towards others. Since we were made for love, in each one of us "a law of ekstasis" seems to operate: "the lover 'goes outside' the self to

38 Cf. Daniel Marguerat, *Les actes des apôtres (1-12)*, Genève: Labor et Fides 2007, p. 363.

39 Thomas d'Aquin, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 3, dist. 27.7.1.a. ad 4: "Dicitur amor extasim facere, et fervere, quia quod fervet extra se bullit et exhalat."

find a fuller existence in another". For this reason, "man always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself". (Fratelli Tutti, 88)

The essence of love is not self-isolation, but the act of sharing and giving. This implies that the dynamic of love entails a process of "going out of self." The Father and the Son give themselves infinitely to each other in eternity, and the flow of this reciprocal self-giving is the Holy Spirit himself. Thus the existence of the Holy Trinity is a perpetual "out-of-self;" or rather, the love that is out-of-self is the very essence of the life of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, creation and redemption as gifts of divine life are not coincidences, but are necessary facts determined by the very nature of the life of the Holy Trinity. To go out of oneself is not merely to interact with others externally, but above all an inner attitude of decentralization and non-attachment, and thus a process of humbly learning from others. Paul describes the mystery of the Incarnation in this way:

Jesus Christ, who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Phil. 2:6-7)

According to Christoph Theobald, one of the main characteristics of Jesus Christ's lifestyle was his capacity to humbly learn from others. For instance, Jesus was reluctant to affirm his identity and refused to be prematurely given a title (cf. Mk. 9:11-13, 12:38-42).⁴⁰ This act of distancing himself from his own identity enabled him to maintain an open and receptive stance towards his disciples and towards all, thereby to learn and to discern in new circumstances.⁴¹

Given that the human person is the image of God and the Church is the People of God, it is incumbent upon both to go out of themselves and, as Christ did, to love others in the same way that God loves them. For this reason, Pope Francis, in *Evangelii gaudium* (nos. 20-24), while emphasizing that the Church "is" its mission itself, redefines the very nature of its existence with the term "outgoing."⁴² The fact that the early church acquired its "Catholic" character through "outgoing" experience is a typical example. Therefore, Christians are by nature people who go out to meet others, and their identity and mission can only be defined in the movement of going out. This is why the experience of the Chinese Catholic students in Europe and Pope Francis' theology of "outgoing" corroborate or resonate with each other. Similarly, for the Church in China, what seems to be an "unpromising" situation today is not necessarily a "crisis" but also an "opportunity" – an opportunity to reconstruct its identity and to develop in a new way, in a new situation, and in a new direction.

The fact that the Gospel repositions itself and is accepted in any place and in any new situation is always an experience of departing from its original culture and traditions to

40 Cf. Christoph Theobald, *L'Europe, terre de mission. Vivre et penser la foi dans un espace d'hospitalité messianique*, Paris: Cerf 2019, p. 176.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

42 The official English version translates it by "going forth." In my opinion, this is a mistranslation, because the original meaning is not to go forth, but to go out. The French translation "en sortie" and the Italian translation of "in uscita," like the Chinese translation can better translate its original theological meaning.

meet and integrate with another culture. Conversely, it is also the process of another culture departing from some of its own inherent concepts, habits, and structures, etc., to meet and integrate with the Gospel, which is of a heterogeneous nature. The former movement is the inculturation of the Gospel, and the latter is the evangelization of culture. The process of the two departing from themselves and integrating into each other can be called “interculturalization.” It can be said that Christian identity is constantly being constructed and reshaped in the interactive and dialectical relationship between exodus and influx.

A complete process of interculturalization and identity reconstruction is a dual process of departure and integration. If contact with the unfamiliar European society and Church is a departure from their own culture for the Chinese Catholic overseas youth, then their selective acceptance of the European society and Church’s influence on them is integration into a new culture. This integration enables the Chinese students to keep a certain distance from the culture of the Church in China, to reflect on it and to choose the elements that are appropriate to their own faith, and thus to depart once again or further from the culture of the Church in China. It is also a new integration, because it is an integration of the newly adopted European social and ecclesial culture and their re-evaluated Chinese ecclesial culture.

This experience of integration of the Chinese Catholic overseas students is important for the development of the Church in China today, because their involvement and service will be like leaven affecting the Church in China, opening it up to the future. This is analogous to the experience of Peter’s openness to the baptism of Cornelius’ family which shaped the Catholicity of the Church. The reason why urbanization represents an opportunity for the Church in China is that, facing the globalization, the Church in China must adopt a universal vision, and urbanization can be seen precisely as a preparatory stage towards globalization. Therefore, as Chinese laypeople who have already “gone out,” these students in Europe can help the Church in China that is “going out” to reposition itself in the new situation. It is for this reason that it is revolutionary to help and form them.

Conclusion

The “outgoing” movement discussed in this paper calls not only for decentralizing and learning from others, but also for stepping out of one’s own mentality and habits. This entails the adaptation, innovation, and reformation in new contexts, as Pope Francis advocates: an outgoing missionary Church

seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. (Evangelii Gaudium, 33)

Since “going out” is the very life dynamism of the Holy Trinity and of Jesus, and since the Church and every person are the image of God, Christians and the Church can only construct their identity in a constant outgoing movement. It is in this sense that “the Church needs to be constantly reformed” (*Ecclesia semper reformanda*). The process of reform, as

an outgoing experience, is also a process of conversion. Therefore, quoting from the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6, Pope Francis says:

The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling ... Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way ... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth”. (Evangeli Gaudium, 26)

This need for conversion as reform applies both to the ecclesial community and to the individual Christian – Chinese Catholic youth who have reconstructed their Christian identity thanks to their stay in Europe, like the Judeo-Christians of the Early Church or like Peter and Paul who went from Jerusalem to Antioch. With their experience of double outgoing and integration, they can revive the Church in China, which is experiencing various forms of “exodus”. Herein lies the link between their reconstructed identity and sense of mission and the Church’s destiny in China. At a time when vocations to the consecrated life are generally declining, and the number of Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters studying abroad is dwindling, helping and forming young Chinese lay students in faith and life – for example, creating youth groups for them, helping them to deepen their spiritual life, and offering them scholarships – is a revolutionary missionary task. Matteo Ripa, Vincent Lebbe, and the missionary congregations have made important contributions to the survival, renewal, and development of the Church in China through similar missionary actions. I believe that, following the footsteps of these pioneers, today’s fourth revolution in mission to Chinese Catholic overseas lay students will also bring about a turning point in the destiny of the Church in China.