Tibetan Wine – On a Specific Chapter of the Catholic Mission's History in Tibet

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Translated by Anna Clart

Tibetan representation of the wedding of Cana in the church of Caidang. Photo: Daniel Salzgeber's private archive.

There can be no doubt: Christianity is the religion most closely linked to wine. The Bible mentions wine and vines no fewer than 443 times. Even the first sign that Jesus wrought, according to John the Evangelist, was centred around this liquid – the transformation of water into wine at the wedding of Cana (Jhn 2:1-12). And when, the night before his execution, Jesus stood firmly within his Jewish tradition and celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples in the form of the Passover Seder, he did so with bread and wine, and charged those with him to continue to do so in his memory (Mt 26:17-29, Mk 14:12-25, Lk 22:7-38, Jhn 13:1-20 and 1 Cor 11:23-26). Ever since, Christians (now worldwide) celebrate the holy Eucharist as "fount and apex of the whole Christian life" (*Lumen gentium*, no. 11)

Discussions about how essential the substances of bread and wine truly are to this celebration have surfaced repeatedly through ecclesiastical history,[1] yet the Catholic teaching office has always held firm that they are mandatory.[2] Only in exceptional cases may wine

1 On this, see the doctoral thesis of Roger Gaïse OP, *Les signes sacramentels de l'Eucharistie dans l'Eglise latine*, Études Théologiques et Historiques, Fribourg, Switzerland: Editions universitaires 2001. Id., *Le pain et le vin pour l'eucharistie dans l'Eglise catholique: L'enseignement du Saint-Siège* (*1566–2017*), Paris: L'Harmattan 2017.

2 On this, see the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, "Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum. On certain matters to be observed or to be avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist*" (2004), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html. No. 50 also regulates the quality of the wine: "The wine that is used in the most sacred celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice must be natural, from the fruit of the grape, pure and

Canon Angelin Lovey at work in the vineyard of Cizhong. This photo was taken in the early 1940s. Photo: Archive of the Canons of Great Saint Bernard.

be substituted with grape juice. In missionary history in particular, this has confronted more than one priest with the difficult logistical question of how to get his hands on altar wine.

For most China missionaries, this posed no problem. Grape wine (called "grape alcohol" or *putaojiu* 葡萄酒 in China) may have long been relegated to a niche position behind the more popular rice wine, yet archaeological findings suggest that wine production in China began around 9,000 years ago. Chinese poems from multiple dynasties describe this wine, including one by Confucius, whose saying "Intoxication is the fault not of the wine but of the drinker" is frequently quoted.[3]

Yet those missionaries chosen for the Tibetan mission faced a different situation. Wild vineyards were scattered and very scarce in Tibet (found south of Lhasa, for example, from where the missionaries who managed to lead a mission station there for several decades in the early 18th century produced their altar wine). Grape wine was little known, in contrast to the popular *chang*. This drink, made of fermented barley or millet and categorised as beer or wine, has remained an important part of Tibetan culture to this day and is consumed both on festive occasions and in daily life.

After the Propaganda Fide entrusted the Tibetan mission to the Paris Foreign Missions, Mission Étrangères de Paris (MEP) in 1846, the French missionaries attempted to reach Tibet both through Sichuan and Yunnan and via northern India. From the late 19th century onwards, they founded a whole series of stations in the border region of south-

incorrupt, not mixed with other substances." Compare too *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 924 §§ 1, 3 and *Missale Romanum*, Institutio Generalis, no. 322. Also see the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Circular letter to Bishops on the bread and wine for the Eucharist* (2017). In 2023, a case made headlines in our secular media when the archbishop of Kansas City admitted that "invalid masses" had been celebrated for years in his diocese, since some priests used wine unsuited for liturgical purposes.

3 The German sinologist Peter Kupfer, a leading expert in the history of Chinese viticulture, wrote two books on this subject: *Zhongguo de putaojiu wenhua* 中国的葡萄酒文化. *Wine in Chinese Culture. Lishi, wenxue, shehui yu quanqiu shijiao de yanjiu* 历史, 文学, 社会与全球视角的研究. *Historical, Literary, Social and Global Perspectives*, bilingual edition, Münster: LIT Verlag 2010; as well as *Bernsteinglanz und Perlen des Schwarzen Drachen. Die Geschichte der chinesischen Weinkultur*, Deutsche Ostasienstudien 26, Gossenberg: OSTASIEN Verlag 2019. See also Li Zhengping, *Chinese Wine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011; Janet Z. Wang, *The Chinese Wine Renaissance: A Wine Lover's Companion*, London: Ebury Press 2019; Li Hua – Wang Hua, *Overview of Wine in China*, Les Ulis: Science Press 2022. – The largest Chinese vineyard regions are currently to be found in the autonomous region of Ningxia in northwestern China as well as Shandong Province on the Chinese east coast.

Part of the ceiling painting of a village church in Loutsekiang Valley. Like almost all paintings in the churches of this valley, it was created by the artist Gabriel Hu Xiaoping, one of the sons of (transl.) "the last patriarch in Loutsekiang Valley," Guy Hu Junjie (on Guy Hu Junjie, see *China heute* 2015, no. 1, pp. 5-7). Photo: Daniel Salzgeber's private archive.

western China and Sino-Tibet, especially around today's Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Diqing 迪庆 (Tibetan: Dechen) in the northwestern part of Yunnan Province. The missionaries carried with them an array of fruits and vegetables (such as apples, pears, cabbage, potatoes, and eucalyptus) that also included grapes. Yet it was ultimately the Canons of Great Saint Bernard, coming from the Swiss wine region of Wallis, who promoted viticulture in the 1930s. Some of these missionaries (like Fr. Paul Coqouz) had been born into vineyard farming families, and they brought with them vine shoots, each pushed into a potato and stored in iron canteens lined with moist moss. This allowed the individual shoots to survive the three-month journey. The missionaries then planted them in their mission station's gardens, before experimenting with shoots from the wild vineyards of the region, that is, the vines once planted by their French confrères, which they grafted onto the Swiss vines (and vice versa), thereby creating different vineyards. The vineyards that still exist today bear witness to this, and are located in the immediate vicinity of the churches,[4] such as in Mekong (Lancang) Valley in Cizhong 茨中 (the one in Xiaoweixi 小维西 no longer exists, as the entire village was flooded a few years after the construction of the Wunonglong dam) and in Yanjing 盐井 (Yerkalo),[5] the only still-standing Catholic

4 Brendan A. Galipeau cites the Catholic lay leader of Cizhong, Wu Gongdi: "wherever there is a church there is a vineyard … and wherever the missionaries went they planted vines. To maintain our Catholic identity, we should plant them and make wine." This quote is found in the online presentation of his talk "Intergenerational Changes in Catholic Faith and Business: Winemaking and Faith among Catholic Tibetans in Southwest China" at the international colloquium "Catholicism, Family, and Asian Societies" from 10 to 11 February 2022 at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, at https://ari.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/PROGRAM_Catholicism.pdf (last accessed July 27, 2025).

5 On February 20, 2023, in an article titled "Magdalene and the Tibetan church, an 'oasis of coexistence' even for the Chinese state media," the missionary news agency *Fides* reported on the consecrated lay woman Magdalene who resides there: "Magdalene also took care of the vineyards that had been planted there by the missionaries. She sees this as an eloquent sign that the seed of Christianity had long since been planted in Tibetan land. And

parish in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, as well as in Loutsekiang Valley, as the upper reaches of Salween River (Nu) are called, in Zhongde.

After the expulsion of the missionaries in the early 1950s, these vineyards and wine production played hardly any role – until the late 1980s, when a single Catholic family from Cizhong (Tse-Tchong or Tse-Zhong, Tsedro, རྩེ་སྡེ in Tibetan)[6] rediscovered the almost forgotten tradition of wine production (with the vines in question primarily being a Cabernet Sauvignon strain that had been eradicated by a pestilence in Europe, and was accounted extinct, as well as miel-de-rose). The lay leader of the village's Catholic community, who was simultaneously an active party member of the China's CP (!), Wu Gongdi,[7] learned viticulture from his grandmother's sister, who herself had learned it as a nun in Yanjing, from the local missionaries. Wu Gongdi viewed the cultivation of vineyards as more than a slice of his village's history: he saw it as a part of local Tibetan tradition, identity, and hospitality. The then-burgeoning tourism, both domestic and foreign, allowed him[8] and his friends to find a lucrative market for their "rose honey wine."

In the 1990s, the Chinese government began to support viticulture with large subsidies. The practice has since spread throughout the region, whether via small village cooperations or the state-subsidised Shangri-La Winery. Thanks to the help of French and Swiss oenologists, the quality of both the vines and the wine production have strongly improved; some of these wines now qualify as top-shelf wines internationally, sold in Europe in the upper price bracket (around € 300 per bottle).[9] Tending the vineyards and producing wine are now important elements of the Chinese-sponsored ethno-tourism in northwestern Yunnan, which gained additional promotion[10] when Zhongdian 中甸 (Tibetan: Gyalthang), a city populated largely by Tibetans and Naxi that serves as the governmental seat

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when she walks among the vines, she rejoices when she encounters Catholics holding rosaries and devout Buddhists twirling prayer beads. The sound of the church bell under the cross mixes with the sound of the Tibetan prayer flags from the cloth woven in the five colors of the valley and the river." See www.fides.org/en/news/73432-ASIA_CHINA_Magdalene_and_the_Tibetan_church_an_oasis_of_coexistence_even_for_the_Chinese_state_media.

6 See Guillaume Giroir, "Géohistoire du christianisme en Chine: le cas du village tibétain catholique de Cizhong et de son vignoble (Yunnan septentrional) (II)," in: *Lucrările Seminarului Geografic Dimitrie Cantemir* 52 (June 2024) 1, pp. 1-38, at www.seminarcantemir.uaic.ro/index.php/ lsgdc/article/view/346/367 (last accessed February 21, 2025).

7 Wu Gongdi is the protagonist of the documentary film "A Path to Tibet," filmed by the Diocese of Hong Kong in 2004 and distributed by Aid to the Church in Need in various languages. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0zKYmmdEfsnb (last accessed July 22, 2025).

8 Since Wu Gongdi's death in 2018, his son Hongxing has taken over the family business. He also runs a wine bar right next to the church.

9 These are top-shelf wines under the brand name "AO Yun" (English: "Flying over the Clouds"), created by LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy); see www.lvmh.com/en/our-maisons/wines-spirits/ao-yun (last accessed July 17, 2025) and www.weine-feinkost.de/shop/Ao-Yun/ (last accessed July 17, 2025). – The wine cellar "Château Roduit," run by the Swiss oenologist Yves Roduit (who came to the region in 2014) jointly with his Tibetan wife Helena, produces wine under the brand name "Shui Ru Da Di 水乳大地" (English: literally "Land of Water and Milk," metaphorically "Harmonious Earth"), sold for 230 Swiss francs per bottle. On "Château Roduit," see the two short films "Behind a Cup of Chinese Wine" at https://m.eyepetizer.net/u1/video-detail?resource_type=video&video_id=177810 (last accessed July 24, 2025) and "Chine: un Valaisan empereur du vin" at https://canal9.ch/fr/chine-un-valaisan-empereur-du-vin/ (last accessed July 24, 2025).

10 The reconfiguration of Sino-Tibetan identities and landscapes through the political and cultural transformation of "Shangrilasation" is the subject of a book by Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins, *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press 2014.

Many of the wine labels depict the church of Cizhong and/or show information on the Catholic missionary history that is linked to the viniculture.
Photos: Daniel Salzgeber's private archive.

of the Autonomous Prefecture of Diqing, was renamed into the mystic "Shangri-La" (Chinese: Xianggelila 香格里拉).[11]

11 In reference to the 1933 fantasy novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton, which centres Shangri-La, a fictional Tibetan place where people live in peace and harmony. The book is accounted a part of world literature and was a bestseller in its time. In 1937, an elaborate and epic film version was created by Frank Capra under its original title. The movie fed into media hype in the late 1930s and significantly contributed to the myth of Shangri-La, shaping the Western view of Tibet and Lamaism to this day. On this, see Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*, London: The

Catholic missionary history as advertisement for wine sales in the village of Cizhong. Photo: Daniel Salzgeber's private archive.

In the region of Cizhong, viticulture remains particularly tied to Catholic Tibetans and is part of the local identity, even if much has changed in the last three decades – partially through the greater focus on the wine industry, which now includes three foreign companies (among them the worldwide largest luxury good conglomerate, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy [LVMH]),[12] and partially through the consequences of the (forced) resettlement of many village residents, thanks to the construction of the Wulong dam 40 km further down in the valley, a construction that has rocked not just Cizhong's socio-demographic composition but also its previous religious equilibrium. For example, Yanmen 燕门, once the district's main township, had to be shifted and is today part of Cizhong, whose townscape has been defaced by ugly new builds, which required the sacrifice of large parts of the once-cultivated land. Western observers of this development even speak of the "end of Cizhong."[13]

The American anthropologist Brendan A. Galipeau, who today teaches as assistant professor at the Institute of Anthropology of the National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan and as a lecturer at Binghamton University (part of the State University of New York),

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Athlone Press 1989; Martin Brauen, *Traumwelt Tibet. Westliche Trugbilder*, Bern – Stuttgart – Wien: Paul Haupt Verlag 2000; Jin Hao, "The Myth of Shangri-La and Its Counter-discourses: (Anti-)Utopian Representations of China's Southwest Frontier in the Twenty-First Century," in: *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 34 (2022) 1, pp. 202-237, www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/mclc.202 2.0009?journalCode=mclc.

12 When LVMH began investing in Tibetan viniculture, the wine culture magazine *vinum* published a series of four articles by X. Xiangyi. These can be found online, with the first article located at www.vinum.eu/de/yoopress-news/weinwirtschaft/2015/grosse-ambitionen-teil-i-moet-hennessy-investiert-in-tibet/ (in German, last accessed July 17, 2025).

13 Brian Eyler, "The End of Cizhong Village, NW Yunnan Province, China," Stimson, March 15, 2019, www.stimson.org/2019/the-end-of-cizhong-village-nw-yunnan-province-china (last accessed July 21, 2025) (the American think tank centre analyses topics like the spread of nuclear weapons, the armament trade, water resource management, poaching in nature and the reaction to humanitarian crises).
See also Matthew Chitwood, "'Grapes of God', Smitten: The Transformation of a Small Catholic Village in Yunnan," The China Project, July 23, 2019, https://thechinaproject.com/2019/07/23/grapes-of-god-smitten-the-transformation-of-cizhong-yunnan/52 (last accessed July 23, 2025).

The Catholic church of Cizhong with the vineyard in its garden. The church was built 1909 and in 2000 was included in the list of the most important nationally protected historical and cultural sites of Yunnan Province.
Photo: Daniel Salzgeber's private archive.

lived in Cizhong and its surroundings during his student days in 2014/2015 to conduct field research. He established deep and lasting relationships with the multi-ethnic local communities (most local residents identified as Tibetans, while others saw themselves as Naxi, Bai, Yi, or Han Chinese). Since then, he has studied the local development of wine production as a form of modern indigenisation (a type of cultural change, in which traditional communities take on, accept, and innovatively integrate "something foreign" into their traditional culture as "something of their own"), and has written many ethnographic articles on the subject.[14] In 2017, he wrote his doctoral thesis on it.[15] 2024 saw the publication of his well-informed book *Crafting a Tibetan Terroir: Winemaking in Shangri-La* (Seattle: University of Washington Press 2024), in which he documents the history from the introduction of viticulture by French and Swiss missionaries in the 19th century for the

14 See the following articles by Brendan A. Galipeau: "Socio-Ecological Vulnerability in a Tibetan Village on the Mekong River, China," in: *Himalaya. The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 34 (2014) 2, pp. 38-51; "Balancing Income, Food Security, and Sustainability in Shangri-La: The Dilemma of Monocropping Wine Grapes in Rural China," in: *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment* 37 (2015) 2, pp. 74-83; "Inheriting Winemaking: Cizhong 'Rose Honey' Wine Production on the Upper Mekong River in Northwest Yunnan Province, China" (photo essay by Sun Fei and Brendan A. Galipeau), *Himalaya Photo Gallery* December 16, 2016, https://himalayajournal.com/2016/12/16/inheriting-winemaking-cizhong-rose-honey-wine-production-on-the-upper-mekong-river-in-northwest-yunnan-province-china; "Tibetan Wine Production, Taste of Place, and Regional Niche Identitities in Shangri-La, China," in: Dan Smyer Yu – Jean Michaud (eds.), *Trans-Himalayan Borderlands: Livelihoods, Territorialities, Modernities*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2017, pp. 207-228; "Protecting Sacred Commons: Balancing Commodity Viticulture Economies with Ecological Health in Shangri-La," in: *Made in China: A Quarterly on Chinese Labour, Civil Society, and Rights* 2 (2017) 2, pp. 46-49; "A Tibetan Catholic Christmas in China. Ethnic Identity and Encounters with Ritual and Revitalization," in: *Asian Ethnology* 77 (2018) 1-2, pp. 353-370; "Free in the Mountains or Home in the Vineyard: Institutional Changes in Agriculture and Negotiating between Contract Farm Labour and Valuable Fungi Collection in Tibet," in: *Journal of Agrarian Change* 21 (2021) 1, pp. 143-159; "Rice, Wine, Grapes, and Land in Shangri-La: The Politics of Land and Water Loss in a Catholic Tibetan Village," in: *Global Food History* 9 (2023) 1, pp. 72-91; "Transforming Ethnic Minority Ecologies in China's Rise," in: Mayfair Yang (ed.), *Anthropology of Ascendant China. Histories, Attainments, and Tribulations*, New York: Routledge 2024.

15 Brendan A. Galipeau, "*Terroir* in Tibet: Wine Production, Identity, and Landscape Change in Shangri-La, China," dissertation at the University of Hawai'i 2017. The thesis can be found at https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/20718b19-d559-4423-a4e7-108db2085060/content (last accessed April 21, 2025).

production of sacral wine through to the commercialisation in the 21st century. In so doing, he highlights how this development has both affected the local population's ethnic-religious identity and wrought changes in the landscape, which unfortunately include the rapid switch from subsistence farming to mono-cultures and the increased use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in large parts of this region. This has forced many village communities to rely on grapes as their sole crop, and confronts them with an uncertain future. Those who traditionally planted wheat and barley for themselves and corn for their livestock now largely fill their fields with a mono-culture of grapes, which also leaves barely any room for keeping yaks. This change is so deep that the residents are being ever more "Sinicised" even during mealtimes, as they increasingly import rice rather than planting the traditional types of wheat.

Galipeau also describes in depth the tensions that this development has brought to the small mountain villages at the foot of Meili Xueshan's highest peak, Khawa Karpo (6740 m), which remains unsummited to this day[16] and is, after Kailash, the second-holiest mountain in the Tibetan-Buddhist tradition. The economic interests of part of the population here clash with ecological concerns and an animistic, Buddhist worldview of mountain gods and their intervention. Thus, for example, the strong shrinkage of the Mingyong glacier or the sickening of many old walnut trees were viewed as divine punishment. These tensions threaten the village communities' traditionally strong social cohesion.

The book, which adopts a sociological and cultural perspective to study viniculture and the changes it has brought to the Sino-Tibetan border region's landscape and the livelihoods of those who reside there, offers a very significant contribution to our understanding of the development in this region, which stands at the intersection of tradition (including an extremely exciting chapter of Catholic missionary history), modernisation and global capital.

Book recommendation:

Brendan A. Galipeau, *Crafting a Tibetan Terroir. Winemaking in Shangri-La*, Foreword by K. Sivaramakrishnan, University of Washington Press 2024, ISBN: 9780295753362

Videos

"Highest Altitude Vineyard Makes Incredibly Unique Wine – Guinness World Record," www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsfwKWfw9U8 (last accessed July 23, 2025).

16 On January 3, 1991, the last attempt to summit this mountain resulted in 17 Japanese expedition members losing their lives. For cultural and religious reasons, the local government in 2001 passed laws forbidding any future summit attempts.

Michaud, Eric, "Les vignobles de l'Himalaya (Chine)," Co-producteurs: ARTE, Viewcom, 2019.

Xiaoli, Lily, "Yunnan Cizhong cun de bai nian tianzhujiaotang 云南茨中村的百年天主教堂. Yunnan the century-old Catholic church | Hidden China S1EP19," www.youtube.com/watch?v=hX5J8y7aAU0 (last accessed July 23, 2025).

Yan, Sophia, "Wine, prayer and song: China's tiny Catholic Tibetan community's uneasy truce with the Communist Party. The pocket of Catholicism in rural southwest China has survived more than 150 years, outlasting war and famine," *The Telegraph*, www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/12/18/wine-prayer-song-chinas-tiny-catholic-tibetan-communitys-uneasy/ (last accessed July 23, 2025).