

## Reflections on the Sinicization of the Catholic Church in China

Li Jingxi

### Introduction



Fr. Li Jingxi at the 10th European Catholic China Colloquium in Siegburg.  
Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

The history of the growth of the Catholic Church in China went through a couple of major phases. Within every phase of the process of evangelization, those who spread the Gospel were all well aware of the importance of the idea of integration into the local situation for the establishment and development of the Church. Ten years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (around 1975) the expression “inculturation” began to be used in all official documents of the Church.<sup>1</sup> Actually, within the language context of the Chinese culture, inculturation was also called “sinicization.”

In view of present day cultural pluralism and the rapid changes within society, how could the Catholic Church be sinicized? In this article the author will talk about some of his own considerations with regards to the sinicization (inculturation) of the Catholic Church. Hopefully these considerations can be of some benefit to the development of the Catholic Church in China.

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1 Zhong Mingdan 钟鸣旦 [Nicolas Standaert], translated by Chen Kuanwei 陈宽微, *Bendihua: tan fuyin yu wenhua* 本地化: 谈福音与文化, Shanghai: Guangqi chubanshe 2000 (see the preface).

## I. Inculturation and Sinicization

Inculturation is an expression used by the Catholic Church in her missiological studies; it refers to a suitable way to propagate the Gospel in an area with a certain cultural background. Concretely speaking, inculturation refers to the question of the Gospel of Jesus Christ encountering another, completely different culture.<sup>2</sup> The Second Vatican Council, although not expressly using the term “inculturation,” nevertheless, by showing a quite open attitude towards every culture in the world and to every religion, surely is providing the Catholic Church with a fundamental and clear concept of inculturation.

The expression “inculturation” might have emerged quite late, but the essential idea of inculturation (its spiritual essence) as such did exist long before. In the New Testament it is mentioned that while St. Paul was preaching to the Greek philosophers in Athens, he told them that the “Unknown God” they were venerating was just the one he was going to introduce to them. Although St. Paul did not mention Jesus by name, he attracted those Greeks by using their language, their literature and symbols and by appreciating the positive value of their culture, and in this way was providing the right preconditions for the promulgation of the Gospel;<sup>3</sup> this is clearly the first example of inculturation of the Gospel (cf. Acts 17:22-33). For the later history of the promulgation of faith in China, ample proof for the existence and the use of the concept of inculturation can be found within the work of evangelization and the realm of theological thinking. Fr. Jac Kuepers SVD (missiologist in Taiwan) believes that inculturation is not only an adaptation of the local Church on the surface with some technical changes to adjust to the situation, but it should begin from the center of the Church community itself, starting with a thorough process of repentance and cleansing of the total community and its complete life. Inculturation on one hand means to confirm the value of a certain culture and to identify oneself with it; on the other hand it should at the same time purify the negative sides by the light of the Gospel and upgrade the culture. In a word, inculturation brings about an encounter of Christian faith with the loftiest ideals of a certain culture.<sup>4</sup>

“Sinicization” – this expression appeared relatively late. By the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic the missionaries were also using the term “sinicization,” but still were applying it in the sense of “inculturation.” Fr. Vincent Lebbe for example studied the Chinese language and got to understand the Chinese culture, he wrote Chinese characters with the brush, etc. Considering things from that level, it is appropriate to explain sinicization and inculturation from the mutual interchange and acceptance of culture. Cardinal Yu Pin once said: “China will have to be Christianized, Christ has to be sinicized.” Here it has to be stressed that the image of Christ has to be formed or a sinicized theology has to be established using the basic idea of truth, goodness and beauty in the

2 See Tan Lizhu 譚立铸, *Zai Zhongguo lun tianzhujiao* 在中国论天主教, Hongkong: Yuandao jiaoliu xuehui 2016, p. 133.

3 See Zhen Jianxiang 甄健湘 [Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan], *Fuyin yushang Zhongguomeng: tianzhujiao zai Zhongguo de tiaozhan yu qianjing* 福音遇上中国梦: 天主教在中国的挑战与前景 [Evangelization in China: Challenges and Prospects], Hongkong: Yuandao jiaoliu xuehui 2016, p. 151.

4 Ke Boshi 柯博识 [Jac Kuepers], compiled by Lü Cihan 吕慈涵, *Fuchuan shenxue* 福传神学, Shanghai: Guangqi chubanshe 2005, p. 159.

Chinese culture. The author believes that, if we are spreading the Gospel with a language and culture generated from Chinese soil, then this is in itself an act of evangelizing the culture, it is sinicization.

Inculturation and sinicization have something in common and also something that distinguishes them from each other. What is common has been mentioned already above; when the Gospel is being propagated in the language context of the Chinese culture and elements of the local culture are being used to explain the Gospel and the religious doctrine, we may call it “sinicization.” What makes them differ from each other is that the term inculturation covers a wider scope, it can be applied to any culture including also the cultures of Latin America, Africa, Asia (like China, Japan, Korea, etc.) Inculturation has essentially a universal scope, while sinicization is basically limited to only one certain place and language context.

## II. How is the Catholic Church being Sinicized?

How does the Catholic Church actually deal with sinicization? Where should she start from? Within a long stream of historical developments of the Catholic Church, the spirit of “sinicization” was always linked with the spreading of the Gospel and to a mutual cultural exchange; furthermore, it was widely used in various fields of thought and within the categories of arts. With regards to sinicization of the Catholic Church the author has, after thoroughly deliberating, come to view the process of sinicization under the following four aspects:

### 1. Sinicization of Theology

As early as during the Ming and Qing Dynasties there were missionaries from the West (like Matteo Ricci, Giulio Aleni, Alfonso Vagnoni, etc.) who clearly understood that if they were to succeed in the propagation of the faith, they had to have a good command of the Chinese language in order to proceed to a fluent and lively exchange with the Chinese people. At the same time they had to be familiar with the ancient books of the Chinese and be well-versed in the essence of the Chinese culture, be able to write theological books in Chinese and use thoughts from the Chinese tradition to express basic contents of the doctrine of the Church, this being the only way to successfully spread the Gospel, such as Matteo Ricci did with his *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義, 1603), written in Chinese. From the Western missionaries we should learn their spirit of research and continue to explore what is true, good and beautiful in the cultural traditions and apply all these precious elements of the culture to the theological research and the doctrine of the Church. The deep thoughts of Western theology could, by way of properly being transferred into an understandable Chinese cultural context, make it possible to communicate the Christian truth, and by doing so establish a truly sinicized theology.

During the time of the Republic of China, Bishop Celso Costantini [from 1922 first Apostolic Delegate for China] paid special attention to an inculturated propagation of the Gospel. He put it this way:

*The missionary is a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not his vocation to transfer European culture to the mission area; his task is, rather, to prepare people, who may have a glorious culture of several thousand years, to accept and absorb the Christian way of life with its basic elements in a way that is suited to them. Every good and noble culture will easily and naturally assimilate the Christian way of life and draw sufficient strength from it to ensure a person's dignity and well-being. The local Catholic faithful should always feel like members of one Catholic family, like citizens of His Kingdom; because of this no one gives up his own homeland, he is still a citizen of his country.<sup>5</sup>*

This sentence tells us clearly: Celso Costantini is not hoping that the missionary transfers the European culture into the local culture, but he is hoping that the Christian culture will meet the local culture and the Christian culture then will permeate and influence the local culture; finally the local culture surely will assimilate the Christian culture, or let us say, the local culture will finally be Christianized. Besides this we also may notice that Celso Costantini apparently wants to say: there is no contradiction between being a Chinese and being a Christian, he therefore corrected that absurd saying that “one more Christian means one Chinese less.”

Celso Costantini stresses that a real inculturation of the Gospel means to ground it totally and with all consequences. He requests us to follow the example of the old Western Church [during the time of the early Jesuit mission to China] by putting all efforts into it, to once more study carefully the essence of faith and truth and then present it in Chinese concepts from within the context of genuine Chinese thoughts.<sup>6</sup> Actually, it does not really matter if these deliberations on inculturation were made by Matteo Ricci or by Celso Costantini or some other Western missionaries, an inculturation of theological thinking as such is worth studying and learning from.

However, if the sinicization of theology is only carried out by following the tradition as handed down, then that is not enough; we cannot avoid turning the focus of our theological thinking to the present day culture of China, because our life situation is based on our present world, our existing problems and our concrete circumstances, touching our life with its thoughts and beliefs. Let us just pay attention to and experience the current situation of the Chinese people, for example environmental pollution, smog, etc., we will then be able to produce some theological thinking with special Chinese characteristics and derive from it a truly sinicized theology. It is as Professor He Guanghu said about the principal problems when doing research on the “Sino-Christian Theology” (“Theology in Chinese Language”): for Chinese theology, when dealing with material on “survival experience” and “cultural resources,” there should be no limitation with regards to time and

5 Gu Weimin 顾卫民, *Zhongguo yu Luoma jiaoting guanxishi lue* 中国与罗马教廷关系史略, Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe 2000, pp. 154-155.

6 See Bulunuo Fabi'ao Biyoujing 布鲁诺·法比奥·毕友敬 [Bruno Fabio Pighin], translated by Jiang Guoxiong 江国雄, *Gang Hengyi shuji: yi wei chuanjiaoshi xinling (1876-1958)* 刚恒毅枢机: 一位传教士心灵 (1876-1958), Xinbei shi: Tianzhujiao Hengyi yuekanshe 2017, p. 80.

space, which means that the research should not be limited to the old times and exclude the present time, it should also not be limited to Mainland China and exclude overseas.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Sinicization of the Church

With regards to promoting the process of inculturation of the Catholic Church in China, the contributions of Bishop Celso Costantini and Fr. Vincent Lebbe cannot go unnoticed. It could be put this way: The initiator of the inculturation of the Church is Fr. Vincent Lebbe, Archbishop Costantini, however, is the one who promoted the inculturation and completed it. Costantini surely was aware that if the Church of China was not administered by bishops who were from their native country, the Chinese Church would not be able to survive by herself and develop further. In order to implement the spirit of the Encyclica *Maximum Illud* of Pope Benedict XV., in 1926 Costantini himself took six Chinese priests to Rome and had them ordained as bishops personally by Pope Pius XI. From there on the real road of inculturation of the Chinese Church began, a sinicized Church was established. Costantini writes in his memoirs: “With the year 1926, the nomination and ordination of the first group of Chinese bishops, one phase of time came to an end, and another completely different phase of time began.”<sup>8</sup>

The Church is a community formed by people who believe in Christ, the Church has her own disciplinary and administrative system. After the Second Vatican Council the Church encouraged the faithful to actively participate in the affairs and the mission of the Church. The Chinese Church is not making an exception, she should let the faithful participate in the administration of the Church. Under the leadership of the clergy and the assistance of the lay faithful, all important matters of the Church will be, by way of democratic action and consulting and by pooling the wisdom for mutual benefit, properly handled in a joint effort. In this way the danger of having the priest in the administration of parish affairs “making all decisions on his own, without the faithful having any say in Church affairs at all” can be avoided. Presently the Chinese government is repeatedly stressing that people involved in religious affairs have their essential role in setting up a harmonious society. This kind of democratic view and harmony in the process of the development of the Church is of utmost importance. Characteristics like these are becoming the basic signs for the successful sinicization of the Church. Such a model of a sinicized management surely will in the future foster the process of sinicization of the Church.

## 3. Sinicization of Arts

Archbishop Celso Costantini not only played an important role in promoting the inculturation (sinicization) of the Church, he also stressed very much that the Catholic Church should play a leading role in the sinicization of arts. Besides studying theology, Celso Costantini was also very fond of painting pictures, he put a lot of effort into studying the

7 See Li Qiuling 李秋零 – Yang Xinan 杨熙楠 (eds.), *Xiandaixing, chuantong bianqian yu Hanyu shenxue (shang-bian)* 现代性、传统变迁与汉语神学 (上编) [Modernity, Transformation of Tradition and Sino-Christian Theology], Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe 2009, pp. 157-158.

8 Bulunuo Fabi'ao Biyoujing, *Gang Hengyi shuji: yi wei chuanjiaoshi xinling (1876-1958)*, p. 80.



history of fine arts. In order to promote the tradition of Chinese arts, in 1923 Celso Costantini wrote a letter to the superiors of two religious orders, where he stressed:

*China should have its own Christian tradition of fine arts, the missionaries should not imitate in China the art style of the Church they are coming from. The missionaries should attach special importance to the local culture and to the local art. The Catholic Church is called "Catholic" due to her surpassing all cultural specifics, so it can accept all elements of a certain local art.*<sup>9</sup>

In order to raise the quality of the religious personnel in the area of culture and arts, Costantini very positively supported the foundation of Fujen University in Beijing (1925), where later (1930) the department of Fine Arts was set up. The aim of Fujen University to set up a department of Fine Arts, was:

*To introduce the best spirit of science and literature of Western Europe and at the same time to preserve the best of the old Chinese traditional culture of literature and arts. Give up the Bad and choose the Good, don't let the prejudice win.*<sup>10</sup>

Costantini's thinking was extremely open, he put great effort into educating talents in the fine arts. He allowed Chen Yuandu, a non-Christian, to teach fine arts at Fujen University in Beijing and encouraged him to paint holy pictures in Chinese style. In 1932 Chen Yuandu received baptism from the hands of Archbishop Costantini, his patron saint was St. Luke.<sup>11</sup> The author thinks today's Chinese Catholic Church should follow the directives of Archbishop Costantini, try hard to discover and educate Chinese art talents and have them get engaged with studies of Chinese art, produce Chinese music, design Chinese architecture and draw paintings with Chinese elements and motifs: Chinese portraits (holy pictures), pieces of music in Chinese rhythm and sound (Masses), architectural structures in Chinese style (churches), and thus let the great dream of a sinicized Catholic art finally come true.

#### 4. Sinicization of the Liturgy

The Catholic Church is a religion which attaches great importance to liturgy. The Church follows a liturgical year with various festival seasons. The Eucharist (Holy Mass) has its especially solemn liturgical celebration. While celebrating its liturgy the Church shows to the people the beauty of its communion and lets people be touched by its spiritual strength. China is a country that stresses ceremony. For different occasions there are different ceremonies. The author thinks that on certain feast days the liturgy of the Church could be combined with traditional Chinese festival ceremonies. For example, every year on the 2nd of November the Catholic Church celebrates "All Souls' Day," the day when one prays for the souls of deceased parents, friends and benefactors, offers Masses for

9 Lei Libo 雷立柏 [Leopold Leeb], *Wo de ling du: yi wei Aodili xuezhe de Beijing suibi* 我的灵都: 一位奥地利学者的北京随笔 [De civitate inspirationis], Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe 2017, p. 206.

10 Liu Ping 刘平, *Zhongguo tianzhujiao yishu jianshi* 中国天主教艺术简史, Beijing: Zhongguo caifu chubanshe 2014, p. 287.

11 Bulunuo Fabi'ao Biyoujing, *Gang Hengyi shuji: yi wei chuanjiaoshi xinling (1876-1958)*, p. 80.

them and goes to the cemetery to perform a ceremony for their eternal rest. In China the people, following their traditional custom of Qingming Festival (Pure Brightness Festival or Tomb-sweeping Day), customarily go to the cemetery in order to *saomu* (sweep the tombs) with the main purpose of making an offering to the ancestors. The author believes that if the Christian faithful would choose the Qingming Festival to go to the cemetery to perform the commemorative ceremony for the deceased parents, relatives and friends (liturgy of perpetual rest), this also could be a most suitable choice (naturally, the common custom to go to the cemetery on the 2nd of November to pray, could also be maintained). In this way the liturgy of the Church and the traditional feast within the Chinese culture (ceremony) could become one unit, and thus even more efficiently embody the sinicization of the Catholic liturgy. In a word, on condition that the substance of Christian belief will not be changed, it should be tried as far as possible to bring the liturgy of the Church into line with the ceremonies of the Chinese tradition. In doing this, an era of sinicization of the liturgy would have come.

## Concluding Remarks

A Christian philosopher of religion said: As long as the Church does not speak Chinese to communicate (the words and deeds of Jesus Christ) and is not accepting the Chinese culture, she has not fulfilled her universal mission yet.<sup>12</sup> Fr. François-Xavier Houang said, although the Western missionaries (from Matteo Ricci on) have for 400 years with tireless efforts spread the thinking of the Christian religion and its moral standards through all levels of the masses of the Chinese people, we still cannot say that what we proclaim is a real Catholic Church, because we are not yet able to completely use Chinese terminology to reflect on and communicate the truth of Christ.<sup>13</sup> What he actually means is: If someone wants to establish a true Catholic Church, he has to rely on Chinese terms and elements from the Chinese culture to express the thinking of the Christian religion. Fr. Lu Zhengxiang confirms this when he says:

*The Chinese language is a kind of language that transfers meanings. The Chinese style and the way of thinking of the philosophers from East Asia are very suitable beautifully and accurately, as well as with incomparable richness, to express the thoughts and wisdom in the Old and New Testament.*<sup>14</sup>

It is evident that the Chinese culture and the Christian religion from the aspect of its content and thinking have very much in common. Therefore, the author is convinced that there is an urgent need to discuss and clarify the issue of sinicization of the Catholic Church.

The inculturation of the Church (sinicization) is the road of survival and growth of the Church in China, at the same time it is the basic request of the Second Vatican Council

12 See Huang Jiacheng 黄嘉城 [François-Xavier Houang], translated by Zhao Yanqing 赵燕清, *Zhongguoren de xinling jiduzongjiao* 中国人的心灵基督宗教, Taipei: Guangqi wenhua shiye 2013, p. 88.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

for the local Church to develop. The author is hoping that still more people will take part in the research work on the sinicization of the Catholic Church, in order to promote a healthy growth of the Catholic Church in China.