

**Foreigners among Their Own Kinsmen --- How Tibetan Catholic Communities  
Survive and Thrive in the Tibetan Regions along the Yunnan-Tibetan Borders**

**Author: Shuyan Huang (Michael)**

**Advisor: Prof. Theodore Pulcini**

**Readers: Prof. Theodore Pulcini, Prof. Mara Donaldson, and Prof. Ann Hill**

**05/06/2019**

**Religion Department at Dickinson College**

## Foreigners among Their Own Kinsmen — How Tibetan Catholic Communities Survive and Thrive in the Tibetan Regions along the Yunnan-Tibetan Borders

### Introduction:

#### 1. An Unexpected Encounter of God:



Figure 1. The Cizhong Cathedral (茨中天主堂). Photography by Shuyan Huang.

In the evening of June 22, 2018, I attended a Mass at the Cizhong Cathedral (茨中天主堂) in Cizhong (茨中), Yunnan Province. I went there with an assumption that these Tibetan Catholics would be somehow different from non-Catholics, but what I saw was a group of Tibetans dressed in exactly the same way as anybody else. Men and women were all wearing traditional Tibetan hood and chuba except one thing which distinguished them from non-

Catholics — everyone was holding a rosary. At about eight o'clock, the Mass started with a collective chanting in Tibetan. I was stunned by this melodic and exotic chanting, and I felt their absolute piety and awe to God even though I did not understand a single word they were chanting. They all knelt and bowed to the Father who was carrying out the sacrament carefully and deftly. During the preaching section, the Father was referring to the Gospel of Matthew 6: 19-20.<sup>1</sup> He taught these villagers not to envy and compete with others for this-worldly wealth. He hoped Catholics would do more beneficial deeds to accumulate merits in heaven, which were the true and everlasting

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:19-20: “Lay not for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.”



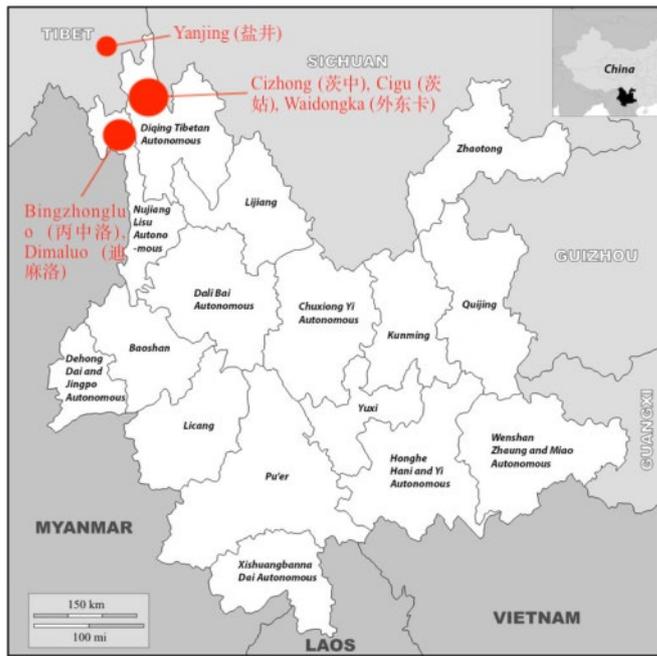
Map 1. China: Tibet and Yunnan. NB: the field research was conducted in the circled area.

treasure. Impressed by a feeling of sacredness and the Father's preaching against the encroaching materialism, I started to wonder: while Catholicism is gradually dying in the West, what keeps these non-Westerners worshipping a "Western God" in a Buddhists' territory? How

strong is their faith?

The whole research started in January, 2018 supervised primarily by Prof. Theodore Pulcini, and the anthropological fieldwork began in June and finished in August, 2018. Chronologically, I visited Cizhong (茨中), Cigu (茨姑), and Waidongka (外东卡), Yanjing (盐井), Bingzhongluo (丙中洛) and Dimaluo (迪麻洛), and about eight cathedrals in these villages. I lived with the local Catholics, ate with them, talked to them, went to churches with them, and conducted a fair amount of interviews and participant observations. Map 1. and 2. indicate the locations of these villages.

Writing an essay on Tibetan Catholicism is too complicated to be contained by a single theory or theories, so a scholar of religion must not limit his focus on particular features which are explainable but broaden his view to appreciate the entire phenomena of a religious tradition in a historical and comparative setting. This does not mean that a scholarship can never rely upon or devise an argument or theory but a gesture of humility



Map 2. Yanjing (盐井), Cizhong (茨中), Cigu (茨姑), Waidongka (外东卡), Bingzhongluo (丙中洛), and Dimaluo (迪麻洛).

to the inexhaustibility of the topic has to be shown. With this notion in mind, the overarching methodology of my essay stems from Clifford Geertz’s two-stage interpretation of religion:

First, an analysis of the system of meanings embodies in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, instead of viewing religion as a mere explanation of the social order as P. Berger’s theory of social construction, or as a private psychological illusion as S. Freud’s psychoanalysis theory, this essay incorporates these two theories in a critical lens in a context of cultural analysis. In other words, not only does religion “interpret social and psychological processes in cosmic terms,”<sup>3</sup> but it also shapes them. This dynamism creates a “thick description” in Gilbert Ryle’s term, which includes both “what happens” and “the subject’s intentions.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, for an interpretive anthropologist, interpreting religion is a matter of, as Geertz says, “guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.”<sup>5</sup> And this is what this essay is striving to do before reaching the argument: *the survival and sustainability of Tibetan Catholicism largely rely*

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973), 125.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 299.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 20.

*upon a dialectical relationship between a charisma of the Church leadership and an improvisation and indigenization of Catholic spiritualities by the Tibetan Catholics.*

## 2. A Brief Historical Background of Catholicism in the Tibetan Regions:

The first group of pioneering Jesuit missionaries came to Tibet in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They established small missionary stations among which the first Catholic mission was established at Tsaparang, Tibet by Fr. Antonio de Andrade in 1625.<sup>6</sup> On Easter Sunday, 12 April 1626, the first foundation of the first church named “Our Lady of Hope,” was laid in Tibet.<sup>7</sup>

However, in the eighteenth century, they were forced to abort their missions after encountering a tremendous resistance from Tibetan religious and political groups. In December 1718, Rome recalled all Jesuits in Tibet, indicating the end of the first phase of discovery by the Church in Tibet.<sup>8</sup> The entire initial period of Jesuit mission lasted from 1625 to 1721, which had set up a stage and local connections for future missionaries both Catholic and Protestant.<sup>9</sup>

In the nineteenth century, having solidified enough political influence in Asia through various treaties signed between China and European imperial countries, missionaries began to flock into various parts of China. The responsibility of converting the Tibetans fell on the Société des Missionnaires Étrangères de Paris/ Paris Foreign Missions (MEP).<sup>10</sup>

Yanjing (盐井) is the only Catholic community left within Tibet, which locates in the southeast corner of Tibet. “Yan” (盐) means salt and “jing” (井) means well, so as the name

---

<sup>6</sup> Mario Aguilar, “The Jesuits in Tibet at the Time of the VI and VII Dalai Lamas,” *The Tibet Journal* 35: 3 (2010): 62.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Khok Gee Lim, “Negotiating ‘foreignness’, localizing faith: Tibetan Catholicism in the Tibet-Yunnan borderlands,” in *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, ed. by J. Bautista and F. K. G. Lim, 79-96 (New York: Routledge, 2009), 81.

indicates, this place produces salt. It used to be one of the major salt producers in this region, and it still is but not as important as before. Therefore, it is reasonable that the MEP, after being expelled from Bonga — the MEP's initial base,<sup>11</sup> they settled down in Yanjing which was wealthy and had lots of merchants and locals as potential converts.<sup>12</sup> The Yanjing Cathedral was established in the 1860s by a French missionary who later became the first Father. Until 1959, there had been 17 foreign missionaries preaching in Yanjing. During the Cultural Revolution, the cathedral was demolished and all Catholic activities had been stopped until 1987 when a new cathedral was built.<sup>13</sup>

Cizhong (茨中), Cigu (茨姑), and Waidongka (外东卡) are all located within Deqin County (德钦县). In 1857, a French missionary attempted to preach in the mainland of Tibet but was denied, so he set up a Catholic base in Deqin which was on the Yunnan-Tibetan borders. Since 1860, the French missionaries started to establish cathedrals and schools, and cure people with diseases; at the same time, they indoctrinated the locals with basic Catholic ideologies.<sup>14</sup> The first Cathedral around this area was built in Cigu (茨姑) in 1866 but it was burnt down by the local Buddhists in a religious strife called “A Dunzi Jiaoan” (阿墩子教案). The new one I visited was probably built in the twenty-first century. The only cathedral being kept intact until today, which was mentioned before, is the Cizhong Cathedral in Cizhong (茨中). It was finished in 1914, made of stones and bricks, whose decorations and architectural design have a fusion of Western, Chinese, and Tibetan styles. Since 1951 Catholicism had been forbidden, so the Cizhong Cathedral was used as a primary school until 1987 when Catholicism was legalized again.<sup>15</sup> Bingzhongluo (丙中洛) and Dimaluo (迪麻洛) are both belonged to Gongshan County (贡山县).

---

<sup>11</sup> John Bray, “Christian Missionary Enterprise and Tibetan Trade,” *The Tibet Journal* 39: 1 (2014): 21.

<sup>12</sup> Lim, *Negotiating ‘foreignness’*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Changdu Regional Gazetteer* (昌都地区志), (Beijing: Fangzhi Press, 2005), 1046-7.

<sup>14</sup> *Deqin County Gazetteer* (德钦县志), (Kunming: Yunnan Minzu Press, 1997), 328.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 329.

### 3. When Chinese Encounter Catholicism:

This section aims to provide a general description of how Chinese people react to and are influenced by Catholicism from both social, political, and ideological perspectives. Although Tibetans culturally differ from Han Chinese, Tibetan Catholics have already integrated Han Chinese culture given a long history of intermarriage between Hans and Tibetans and the assimilation of mainstream Chinese culture. Therefore, the information given in this section is still able to shed some light on how Tibetan Catholics have reacted to Catholic practices and philosophy. Every thought, idea and relevant research introduced in this section will be connected to the Tibetan Catholic communities. I hope this information helps to interpret the dynamic and mutual interactions between Tibetan Catholics and their cultural heritage and the general environment, which are demonstrated in a variety of unique spiritualities discussed later in the essay. Structurally, this part is served as a general literature review on relevant scholarly sources in this field.

- *Ancestor Worship: folk religious Catholicism and Catholic indigenization process:*

First and foremost, ancestral worship is one of the most predominant ritual practices in Chinese folk religious culture. Through regular worshipping, ancestral spirits are believed to be able to protect the property and health of the family, perpetuate harmony, and maintain the familial lineage.<sup>16</sup> This age-old custom conflicted at the beginning phase with the promulgation and the development of Catholicism in China, engendering the Chinese Rites Controversy. Jacques Gernet, in his *China and the Christian Impact*, quoted a primary source on how Western missionaries reacted to this custom:

“Recently, when I had set up a family temple to worship my ancestors, the Western men of letters (the missionaries) found fault with me, saying: ‘These are your family

---

<sup>16</sup> C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 29.

masters. But there must also be a greater master. Do you not recognize him?’ To which I scoffingly replied: ‘That great master is the Sovereign on High (*shangdi*, 上帝) and in our China only the son of Heaven (the emperor) may sacrifice to him. Nobody else would dare to do so.’<sup>17</sup>

Apparently, there is an unsolvable incompatibility between ancestral worship and Christian doctrine, Chinese Catholics are flexible and adaptable enough to find a way to keep both. According to Beverly Butcher’s account, in New Jersey, Some Chinese Americans who were Catholic, held a Chinese New Year Mass by setting up the ancestor tablet besides the altar, which was honored along with the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

This creative improvisation is one example of how Chinese Catholics reconcile their ingrained folk religious practices with the idea of an omnipotent and anti-idolatrous God. In a heterogenous and dynamic environment like China in which institutional religions are constantly interacting with various folk religions, syncretic and eclectic phenomena are inevitable. Through emphasizing the aspects of utilitarianism and pragmatism in Chinese culture, Gao Shining has argued the idea of folk religion-styled Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Viewing Christianity as merely a more powerful and systematic vassal which still carries the same superstitious rituals and beliefs, Gao thinks that a Christian God is no different from a Buddha or any other celestial beings for Chinese Christians.<sup>20</sup> Due to a lack of education, scarcity of priests, misconceptions about Christian theologies, and conflation of folk religious and Christian rituals, Chinese Christianity has been shaped into another form of folk religion under the name of God.<sup>21</sup> Gao’s theory definitely gives us some new insight into how Christianity has been accepted and molded by Chinese people into a brand-new

---

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 106.

<sup>18</sup> Beverly Butcher, *Chinese and Chinese American Ancestor Veneration in the Catholic Church, 635 A.D. to the Present* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 300.

<sup>19</sup> Gao Shining, “The Impact of Contemporary Chinese Folk Religions on Christianity,” in *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, ed. by M. Ruokanen and P. Huang, 170-181 (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 177-179.

form with Chinese characteristics. However, given the fact that China is a gigantic and diversified country in which Christians from different ethnic, educational, geographical, religious, and linguistic backgrounds can interpret Christianity in drastically distinct ways, this theory is a sweeping approach to answering a complicated situation. Folk religions have influenced Christianity a lot in terms of theology and rituals, but it does not mean that folk religions have replaced the Christian set of practices except in name.

Furthermore, Richard Madsen also embraces the idea of viewing Chinese Catholicism as a localized folk religion. However, instead of treating Chinese Catholicism as a deviation from the orthodox Catholicism or a Catholic version folk religion, he sees it as “an authentic form of belief and practice to be understood on its own terms.”<sup>22</sup> Starting with the historical background, Madsen briefly introduced how Catholicism was marginalized by aristocrats in the Qing Dynasty, forcing missionaries to focus on proselytizing the uneducated and rural people. Contrary to what missionaries had planned, Catholicism began to become a popular religion for people from the bottom of society and it is inevitable for Catholicism to be sinicized and syncretized with local folk religious thoughts and practices.<sup>23</sup>

Specific spiritualities such as the Marian Cult, are predominantly popular across the nation because they correspond with traditional Chinese culture to a greater extent. Having recognized the complexity and nuances embedded in Chinese Catholicism, Madsen stresses the notion of situatedness, which is to understand a particular religious tradition in its particular social, geographical, political, and cultural environment. In addition, Madsen observes a rising emphasis on community and family among Chinese Catholics since the twentieth century probably due to the diminishing influence of local folk religious rituals.<sup>24</sup> After traditional rituals have been discouraged and abolished by the governmental

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard Madsen, “Beyond Orthodoxy: Catholicism as Chinese Folk Religion,” in *China and Christianity: burdened past, hopeful future*, ed. by S. Uhalley Jr. and X. Wu, 233-249 (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 234.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 246.

modernization process, the hostility between Catholicism and local folk religions has gradually faded. What remains are the fundamental moral values of filial piety and loyalty to family and ancestors. These moralities do not directly contradict with Catholic doctrines, and in most cases, including Tibetan Catholics, Catholics integrate these traditional moralities into their Catholic rituals. Sometimes, a whole village or an entire family chose to convert to Catholicism and they keep being Catholic to strengthen family unity. Catholic expression of these traditional values is never as simple as another version of folk religion but is a continuum, redefinition, and evolution of Chinese moralities.

Whenever different sets of religious beliefs and practices interact with each other, the effects should be mutual, dynamic, and evolutionary. By “mutual” and “dynamic,” I mean that the changes are shown on both parties, and they are not once and for all but continually cause derivative influence. As for “evolutionary,” having assimilated elements from another set of beliefs, the original religious rituals, symbols, and theologies are endowed with another layer of meaning. For example, after a folk religious healing practice has been integrated into a Christian context, it is never a simple practice for physical therapy but also a spiritual cleansing for future salvation. So do Tibetan Catholics whose unique spiritualities, apparently the same as normal Chinese folk religious practices, have to be examined and interpreted in a meticulous fashion.

Besides Gao and Madsen’s theories on Chinese Catholicism as a folk religion, Eriberto Lozada provides an interesting account of Chinese Catholic funeral and tomb-visiting in a small Catholic village in Canton called Little Rome. From various examples narrated by him, Catholic villagers do not deviate too much from non-Catholics and in most cases, they either renamed various traditional practices or changed the customary date. Here is one example of tomb-visiting:

“The Catholics in this village do not practice ‘veneration on sevens’ (*zuo qi*, 做七), which entails visits to the graves and offerings on the seventh day after the burial and on different multiples of seven according to the local custom. Instead, a prayer group goes to the grave of a deceased person the tenth day and the thirtieth day to again recite the prayer sequence described earlier...On the one-month anniversary of his father’s death, Changyuan and his family asked Father Liang to perform the day’s mass in Mr. Ye’s memory...the requesting family usually gives the priest a small donation, or gift; in Little Rome in 1997 the size of the gift was 50 to 100 RMB for a memorial mass.”<sup>25</sup>

Based on his anthropological research, Lozada attempts to answer the same question about how to reconcile the conflict between the indigenous folk religion (in this case, it is Hakka) and Catholicism. Lozada’s answer is the indigenization of Catholicism in China, which specifically means that the indigenization process “lies in the universal Catholic Church’s emphasis on orthodoxy and a core of ritual practices (the mass and the seven sacraments), coupled with flexibility in the form of life-cycle ritual practices.”<sup>26</sup>

Comparing Catholic funerals to non-Catholic ones, Lozada concludes that they both share a lot of structural similarities, specifically the nine practices defined by James Watson: (1) the announcement of the death to the community; (2) the mourning clothes and symbols; (3) the cleansing and preparation of the body; (4) burning paper objects for the dead; (5) a written memorial; (6) the money for rituals; (7) the performance of ritual music; (8) the sealing of the body in the coffin; (9) the transfer of the coffin.<sup>27</sup> What distinguishes Catholic rituals from its counterpart are specific practices concerning salvation, such as unction, the twice-daily prayer group visitations, and the final prayers for the dead.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Eriberto Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 141.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>27</sup> James Watson, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed. by J. Watson and E. Rawski, 3-19 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 12-15.

<sup>28</sup> Lozada, *God Aboveground*, 148.

Having witnessed an emphasis on ritual practices, sequences, and nuances between Catholicism and Hakka, Lozada arrives at a conclusion that orthopraxy,<sup>29</sup> as a guiding principle, helps to perpetuate two apparently contradictory belief systems, harmonize them, and eventually indigenize Catholicism into Chinese soil.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Catholicism as a religio-ethnicity?:

The study of ethnicity in China has been one of the most controversial topics mainly because of its entanglement with the governmental scheme of unifying the diversified country as a single nation-state. The official propaganda has described China as a unified and multiethnic state (*tongyi duominzu guojia*, 统一多民族国家), but in reality it is never the case. A significant number of Tibetans, Uyghur Muslims, Hong Kong Chinese and other ethnic minorities are still requesting the central government to respect and restore their cultural heritage and autonomous rights. Therefore, there is a disconnection between the Chinese national identity and the local ethnicity usually associated with its own culture, language, religion, history, and race. Religion is definitely one of the predominant factors which has formed and strengthened a local collective consciousness. Thus, should Tibetan Catholics be considered as a separate ethnicity or just a group within the larger Tibetan ethnicity? Though Tibetan Catholics are not officially recognized by the state as a separate ethnic group, does it mean that they do not regard themselves as one or to what extent do they distinguish themselves culturally and ethnically from non-Catholic Tibetans?

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, groups of social scientists, communist cadres, and researchers were designated to the frontiers to

---

<sup>29</sup> See T. N. Madan and Madan, "Hindu Orthopraxy," in *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*, ed. by W. Roof and M. Juergensmeyer (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011). "Orthopraxy, a term derived from Greek meaning 'correct action/activity,' is descriptive of religions that emphasize conduct, both ethical and liturgical, as opposed to faith or grace."

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 149.

identify and register various local communities as official ethnicities (*minzu*, 民族). The Chinese term *minzu* was adopted from the Japanese *minzoku* and started to be popularly used since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the notion of ethnicity was really a new concept for this new born republic in 1911 funded by Sun Yai-sen<sup>32</sup> who visioned a unified Chinese nation up against the intrusions of imperialism.<sup>33</sup> Han Chinese, which occupied approximately 91% of the total population in 1990, has been recognized as the official majority ethnicity. In terms of language, the northern dialect, Mandarin has been imposed as the *lingua franca* since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup>

Since the mid-1950s, the State Commission for Nationality Affairs (SCNA) has depended upon Stalin's four criteria for defining a *minzu*: "a common language, a common territory, a common economic life, and a common psychological make-up manifested in common specific features of national culture."<sup>35</sup> However, in practice there are discrepancies between the ethnic identification process and the application of Stalin's rubric, and Dru Gladney gives an example of Hui. Historically, the Hui are descendants of Muslim merchants, militia, and officials mainly from the Middle East to China from the seventh to fourteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup> Nowadays, the Hui people are spread sporadically across the entire nation like Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Beijing, etc. Based on Stalin's criteria, they do not speak a common language but their own local dialects, they do not live in a common locality, they have different social and economic backgrounds, and they do not share a common culture except Islam.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, from this example, we can see there

---

<sup>31</sup> Dru Gladney, *Ethnic Identity in China: The Making of a Muslim Minority Nationality* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 19.

<sup>32</sup> The founding father of the Republic of China, who had led revolutions toppling the Qing Dynasty.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge: The Council on East Asian Studies at Harvard University, 1991), 66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

is actually never a fundamental and guiding principle for ethnic identification in China but one thing for sure is that Han's majority position should not be challenged whatsoever.

As for Tibetan Catholics, this ambiguity embedded in the ethnic identification process has created a series of questions? Why does the government not register all Catholics in China as an ethnicity just like Hui identified by their Islamic heritage? If the government did classify all Catholics as an ethnicity, would Tibetan Catholics be among them? There is not a definitive answer to these questions, but they do make us ponder on issues of how the state reacts to Tibetan Catholics as well as how Tibetan Catholics perceive themselves. Technically speaking, Tibetan Catholics are supposed to be regarded as a separate ethnicity, because they speak Tibetan, practice Catholicism, have a common economic life (i.e. tourism and farming), live in a common region, and share a common cultural heritage and memory of religious persecutions and martyrdom. Therefore, the conflict between their ethnic awareness and the state's nonrecognition has antagonized some Tibetan Catholics who want to assert their Catholic identity and also perplexed others who struggle with being either Tibetan, Catholic, or Chinese.

F. K. G. Lim who has done in-depth anthropological research on the same communities as I researched on, argues that Tibetan Catholicism has drawn a symbolic distinction between Tibetan Catholics and non-Catholic Tibetans and it has become a major component of Tibetan Catholics' identity. Sharing the same historical narratives of the martyrdom of their beloved missionaries and the persecutions by the government, Tibetan Catholics unify themselves under the omnipotent and omniscient heavenly Father. Based on my personal observations and interviews, I agree with Lim's claim that Catholicism is largely associated with Tibetan Catholics' self-ethnic awareness. However, because of the invading distractions from tourism, materialism, and socialism, I have witnessed the tie

between Catholicism and their collective consciousness has gradually loosened. Therefore, more details and information will be discussed in the later part of the essay.

Also focusing on the Tibetan Catholic communities by examining a particular missionary's records, Margaret Swain proposes that the whole conversion process to Catholicism may provide instrumental advantages for the local community to cope with the multiethnic milieu.<sup>38</sup> The missionary whom Swain has researched on, Pere Vial, in his letters, expresses his goal of transforming instead of destroying the local culture.<sup>39</sup> In other words, traditional practices were preserved with modifications and additions of Christian theologies and doctrines. Based on what I have witnessed in these communities, after being Christianized, the local culture has been given a more sophisticated and systematic religious structure, and it is endowed with both horizontal and vertical associations with global Catholicism and historical Christian patriarchs and prophets. Catholicism has deepened the meaning of the local culture, solidified the cultural roots, and hybridized with these traditions to form a brand new collective consciousness or ethnicity.

Furthermore, in terms of ethnic recognition and identification of religious minorities in China, Dru Gladey has raised a provocative idea that "the representation of the 'minority' in China reflects the objectivizing of a 'minority' nationality discourse that parallels the valorization of gender and political hierarchies." He later elaborates that "the widespread definition and representation of the 'minority' as exotic, colorful, and 'primitive' homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic, and modern."<sup>40</sup> This intentional and systematic characterization of the minority as being alien and exotic, creates a binary relationship between the majority and the minority. His theory implies that ethnic

---

<sup>38</sup> Margret Swain, "Pere Vial and the Gni-p'a: Orientalist Scholarship and the Christian Project," in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. by S. Harrell, 140-185 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 177.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>40</sup> Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/ Minority Identities," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53: 1 (1994): 93.

or religious minorities, such as Catholics, Tibetans, or Muslims, are exoticized and eroticized by the majority, the Han Chinese government, to maintain the hegemony of the majority and to form the idea of the Chinese “nation.”<sup>41</sup> Bearing this notion in mind, we are supposed to examine the ethnic label of Tibetan Catholicism from another fresh perspective. Several questions have to be asked? To what extent has the state been involved in the ethnic identification process of Tibetan Catholics? To what extent do Tibetan Catholics associate themselves with Catholicism as a unique identity for more practical reasons such as material benefits gained from tourism and the state?

In order to elaborate this idea of ethnic building, the invention of Shangri-La in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture where most Catholic communities are located, is the best example. Inspired by James Hilton’s world-famous novel *Lost Horizon* in which “Shangri-La” is depicted as a utopian place in Tibet, Zhongdian County (中甸) was renamed Shangri-La in 2002 to make the region a tourist hotspot. Having scrutinized this place reinventing enterprise, Åshild Kolås concludes with three major purposes behind this gigantic scheme: (1) this place has been “sacralized” to be incorporated into the “sacred realm” of Buddhist Tibet; (2) Tibetans in this region have been deliberately “ethnicized” to serve the establishment of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; (3) this area has been “exoticized” to attract tourists.<sup>42</sup>

In China, ethnic minorities have been portrayed as being less “civilized,” and more “primitive” and “backward.” The government has deliberately promoted to keep these minorities’ festivals, dress, arts, architecture, and religious practices in order to preserve the “authenticity” and “primitiveness” of these minorities. The economic benefits from this project are significant mainly from tourism; the head of the Tourism Department

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>42</sup> Åshild Kolås, “Tourism and the Making of Place in Shangri-La,” in *Ethnic Minorities in Modern China: Critical Concepts in Asian Studies Volume II*, ed. by Colin Mackerras, 273-288 (London: Routledge, 2011), 273.

emphasized this point: “Tourists like the exotic, to return to nature. They don’t like modernization. Foreign tourists will make up the majority of tourists who visit this area in the future. Other areas are too developed, and this area will attract them.”<sup>43</sup> Instead of fostering and perpetuating the traditions, various cultural activities are manufactured for tourists rather than for the sake of ethnic and cultural continuum. Monks are encouraged to engage in entrepreneurial activities, charging entry fees, running grocery stores, etc.<sup>44</sup> In other words, apparently traditional culture has been “preserved,” but actually the Tibetan culture has been objectified and commoditized as a product manufactured daily by a group of “cultural producers.” Tibetans produce their culture but they do not live their culture.

Besides the economic reason, the making of Shangri-La has successfully contested the indigenous “Tibetanness” and ethnicized the local Tibetans as a Tibetan ethnicity subject to the central government. There are two specific steps taken by the state to introduce the state-invented “Tibetanness” into this region. Firstly, Diqing region is granted the Tibetan minority title and the right of “autonomy” in accordance with the national guidance. Secondly, through land reforms, villages, roads, and places have been renamed and reorganized to eradicate any trace of indigenesness, and names like “Long March Road” and “village number one” are imposed.<sup>45</sup> The making of Shangri-La perfectly demonstrates how state-manipulated ethnic construction schemes function. Tibetan Catholic communities, even though they are not as big and significant as Shangri-La, are also being ethnicized by the state for tourism and political considerations.

### 5. Chinese Catholics as a Civil Society?:

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Cingcade, “Tourism and the Many Tibets: The manufacture of Tibetan ‘tradition’,” in *Ethnic Minorities in Modern China: Critical Concepts in Asian Studies Volume II*, ed. by Colin Mackerras, 250-272 (London: Routledge, 2011), 266.

<sup>45</sup> Kolås, “Tourism and the Making of Place in Shangri-La,” 279.

Having discussed the integration and indigenization of Catholicism into the local culture and a collective awareness of religio-ethnicity centered on Catholic doctrines, this introductory part has to finally address the relationship between the Tibetan Catholic communities and their neighboring communities as well as the larger political and social environment. Do they perceive themselves and function as an independent entity with a distinct set of moral and cultural norms? Are they attempting to gain political freedom? Finally, to what degree are they considered a civil society? Although there are not definitive answers to these questions, discussing and giving possible answers to them are fundamental for exploring the sustainability and prospect of Tibetan Catholicism, and they will be recurring constantly in the discussion part as a guiding principle for the reader.

Based on the *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, a “civil society” is defined as “an area of social consensus based on agreements about norms and values. Whereas the state requires some level of force, civil society implies a degree of freedom.”<sup>46</sup>

Richard Madsen is famous for associating Chinese Catholics with civil society. His theory is derived from Ding Xueliang’s concept of “institutional amphibiousness,”<sup>47</sup> which stresses the parasitism, manipulation, and conversion of a civil society towards the state rather than a direct confrontation between them.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, besides examining how “free and autonomous” Chinese Catholic communities are, which is an entirely Western standard, Madsen also takes civility — a set of moral systems — into consideration.<sup>49</sup> Later, Madsen gives three explanations to demonstrate that Chinese Catholics are not ready to be

---

<sup>46</sup> “Civil society,” in *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, ed. by Bryan Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> “Institutional amphibiousness” — a civil society, although it is not entirely independent from the state, is able to develop its own agenda through various ways of “uncertainty, ambiguity, opacity, and confusion,” rather than being a complete antithesis of the state.

<sup>48</sup> X. L. Ding, “Institutional Amphibiousness and the Transition from Communism: The Case of China,” *British Journal of Political Science* 24: 3 (1994): 293.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998), 14.

called a civil society: (1) they focus on vertical relationships of authority and dependence more than on wide horizontal relationships of reciprocity and cooperation; (2) their solidarity is too focused and restricted at the village level; (3) their religiosity is self-interested and this-worldly instead of expanding love and loyalty to others.<sup>50</sup> However, Madsen still thinks there have been cases of Chinese Catholic communities as potential civil societies, and he believes that this situation is subject to change because for these communities, religiosity is so intertwined with local economic, political, and historical factors.<sup>51</sup>

#### 6. Chinese Local Political Reality and Culture:

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the biggest and one of the most powerful governments in the world, and has dominated all religious affairs since 1949 in China. The establishment of the patriotic churches, delegitimization and demonization of Dalai Lama, and the outrageous persecutions of Uyghur Muslims all demonstrate the CCP's ruthless strategies and its intransigent determination of asserting the superiority of a socialist-communist regime. Therefore, scholars can never fully grasp the social and political situations of a religious community in China without understanding how the local government functions.

First and foremost, *guanxi* (关系), is a mode of informal social exchange and relationship, which is translated as "connection" in English, but it has a more convoluted meaning in the context of Chinese society. In many circumstances, the breath and depth of one person's *guanxi* networks determine whether or not he or she can get things done. Through the course of its evolution, *guanxi* is no longer limited in interpersonal

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

connections, but enlarged into cross-regional/cross-sectoral networks which are mainly nourished by bribes and usually illegal reciprocity. In the post-Mao era, especially *guanxi* practices have become even more complicated and entrenched, but at the same time are necessary and powerful, which causes the circumvention of legal and institutional restrictions. Therefore, *guanxi* is fundamental in securing bank loans, construction contracts, state subsidies, and avoiding inspections.<sup>52</sup>

Secondly, in the post-Mao era, the hierarchical status of political echelons determines an official's treatment, including the readership of classified information, higher salaries, housing allocations, and medical care.<sup>53</sup> Since the norm of rank-seeking has permeated throughout each bureaucratic level and unit, the consequence is a pervasive "*apparatus-ization*" (*jiguan hua*, 机关化) and "*administrat-ization*" (*xingzheng hua*, 行政化). All strategies and plans which officials execute stem from their concern of being promoted and recognized by their senior officials. Therefore, most local officials prioritize economic development over other pressing issues such as environmental sustainability and cultural preservation.

In addition, the culture of corruption has permeated China and infiltrated every level of the apparatus. Many scholars think the incompatibility of Marxism and Confucianism is the main genesis of corruption.<sup>54</sup> Since the 1980s, due to the opening of the Chinese market, the rise of materialism has made the mixture of ideologies even more convoluted. Chinese officials encountered an unprecedented value and moral dilemma because there were no unified moral standards and stable value systems internalized in their minds. Take Confucianism for example, Matthew Sommer's journal argues that Confucianism, which

---

<sup>52</sup> Xiaobo Lu, *Cadres and Corruption: the organizational involution of the Chinese Communist Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 176.

<sup>53</sup> Xiaobo Lu, "From rank-seeking to rent-seeking: Changing administrative ethos and corruption in reform China," *Crime, Law & Social Change* 32 (1999): 349.

<sup>54</sup> Lu, *Cadres and Corruption*, 19.

is a human-based ideology, has not been deeply internalized by people, especially the illiterate and the poor.<sup>55</sup> A similar idea is also mentioned in Nimick's article which describes several local Yamen staffs' behaviors as completely contradictory to the essence of Confucianism.<sup>56</sup>

There was one major administrative reform which played a significant role in causing corruption, which was the expansion of the state. This expansion is illustrated mainly by the magnificent increase in permanent offices.<sup>57</sup> Between 1984 and 1991, approximately 50,000 new "section-level" offices were created or upgraded with an increase rate of an additional 9,000 annually.<sup>58</sup> In 1985 the number of cadres on the state payroll increased 40.1 percent, and by the end of 1996, the number of personnel on the payroll accounted for 3 percent of the total population.<sup>59</sup> This expansion burdened the government's financial budget, and the entire bureaucratic apparatus was overstaffed which caused many to idle while still receiving salaries. Due to the decreased wages and limited pension, officials tended to seek other means to earn profits such as corruption. Another consequence along with the increased offices was a large extent of decentralization of power, so local officials faced fewer obstacles when executing authorities.

Another contributing effect to government corruption is market reform. The relationship between the market and corruption relies on economic transactions. The basic idea is that in circumstances in which the market is not fully developed and administrative manipulation is involved, people have the tendency to procure monopoly positions and privileges through legal and illegal means. Corruption is caused primarily by a scarcity of

---

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 23-114.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Nimick, "A Twisted Tale of Love and Treachery in a Small County in Ming Times," *Ming Studies* 43 (2000), 47.

<sup>57</sup> Lu, *Cadres and Corruption*, 159.

<sup>58</sup> *Liaowang*, no. 39, 1997.

<sup>59</sup> Lu, *Cadres and Corruption*, 161.

resources, which is intentionally created by the government to promote the economy.<sup>60</sup> Under the pressure of the unequal allocation of resources, private citizens try to seek patrons through gift-giving, bribes, and other means.<sup>61</sup> Given the reality that the economy in the Tibetan Autonomous Region is relatively backward compared to other parts of the country, economic manipulations and illegal transactions are happening which will be discussed later.

Last but not least, considering the communities' peripheral geographical location, according to Skinner's core-and-periphery theory, the farther the region is away from the center, the less effective policy and ideology from the center are implemented. Being incorporated with legal positivism and Confucianism, the core-and-periphery theory well explains why in the peripheral areas government policies and Confucian doctrines are less practiced. Tibet is located thousands of miles away from Beijing, which has its unique languages, natural landscapes, customs, and social norms. The Confucianism-centered ideology and political ideas radiated from Beijing might not be able to reach Tibet. However, this point has to be verified in specific cases since advanced transportation and the massive industry of tourism have brought these central ideas to Tibet, and there are cases indicating this phenomenon.

### 7. Transnational Catholicism and Sino-Vatican Diplomacy:

The academic studies on Catholicism in China have been focused on the encounter of a universal and global religion with a rising nationalism and socialism under a totalitarian regime. There are several reasons which demonstrate the significance of Sino-Vatican relationships. Firstly, because of the hierarchical structure and authority distribution within

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>61</sup> David Wank, "Evolving Business-State Clientelism in China: The Institutional Organization of a Smuggling Operation," in annual meeting of American Political Science Association, Boston, August, Vol. 28.

the Catholic Church, every single Catholic around the world has two requirements to fulfill: the individualistic faith and loyalty to God and the affiliation to the local church which is subject to the Vatican.<sup>62</sup> It is the second requirement which has troubled the Chinese government the most, because this global affiliation to the Vatican means the Vatican regulation is beyond national boundaries. This pre-Socialist idea of religious universalism has made Catholicism one the most politically subversive threats in the eyes of Chinese communist leaders.

Secondly, due to its accountability for global Catholicism, the Vatican has to protect Catholics in China from political persecutions while maintaining their loyalty and trust to Rome. Another major reason is that the Vatican has been recognized as the smallest sovereign state which means it has political representation and official diplomacies with other sovereign states. The Chinese government as a completely secular entity, has lots of problems both ideologically and physically dealing with the Vatican both as a Catholic world leader and a politically sovereign state. With the Vatican, China is not able to follow its usual diplomatic pattern with other states including arms race, economic leverage, cultural exchanges, etc. The Vatican exists as a state merely “in the juridical sense: it has no cultural or economic capacity of any significance for China.”<sup>63</sup>

In order to reject the authority of the Vatican, the Chinese government has established the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) to oversee all Catholic churches across the nation. Within the CPA, there is a demarcation between members who are loyal to the Holy See and those who are obedient to the government. This division within the Chinese Catholic leadership has its repercussions on the local level including the Tibetan Catholic churches. In recent years, the tension between the Vatican and the Chinese government has

---

<sup>62</sup> Beatrice Leung, *Sino-Vatican Relations: Problems in conflicting authority 1976-1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

assuaged and both parties have strived to reach an rapprochement. One major compromise that China requests from the Vatican is its disconnection with Taiwan because China has refused to recognize Taiwan's legitimacy as a sovereign state.<sup>64</sup> Although the Vatican has not fulfilled China's request on how to handle the issue of Taiwan, it did make a concession on the issue of the CPA's appointed bishops who are acknowledged by the Vatican. The future of the Sino-Vatican relationship is not foreseeable because Xi Jinping has tightened regulations on religious affairs in China, but one thing for sure is that the transnational processes have wielding influences on the local churches.

Therefore, the transnational dynamics between the Vatican and China is one of the essential components of the academic studies of Chinese Catholicism at a local level. Its ties to the Vatican have partially shaped individual theologies and how Catholics perceive themselves collectively as a group. In Lozada's view, instead of regarding the transnational processes as an entire challenge to state sovereignty, "in the postsocialist period, new and reformed structures have struck a precarious balance between state sovereignty and transnational processes," which is exemplified by the Little Rome above-mentioned.<sup>65</sup>

James Watson distinguishes globalism from transnationalism by saying: globalism is "an essentially impossible condition that is said to prevail when people the world over share a homogenous, mutually intelligible culture," whereas transnationalism is the process by which ideas, people, and commodities are exchanged beyond national boundaries.<sup>66</sup> Building upon Watson's dichotomy, Lozada argues that Little Rome is undergoing a process of transnationalism through engaging in transnational Catholic dynamics, privatizing economic entities, and mobilizing the people in diaspora.<sup>67</sup> Through

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Lozada, *Gov Aboveground*, 10.

<sup>66</sup> James Watson, "Introduction: transnationalism, localization, and fast foods in East Asia," in *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, ed. by J. Watson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>67</sup> Lozada, *Gov Aboveground*, 198.

emphasizing villagers' Catholic identities, people in Little Rome are able to form a solid group solidarity and establish ties with groups in diaspora internationally. The local government is also satisfied by the political stability brought by people's unity, and the religious bondage is one of the most essential reasons.<sup>68</sup>

**Methodology:**

My primary sources are derived from interviews and participant observations conducted in my ethnographical field research in these Tibetan communities. I attempted to diversify my interviewees who were Tibetans, Hans, Catholics and Buddhists. I did target people who are related to the Church such as the Fathers, the Church's accountants, and even the Church's doorkeepers, because they might have insights that others do not have. In order to collect in-depth information, interviews were usually conducted in a casual manner because most of the interviewees were peasants who were not accustomed to a formal setting.

As for the participant observations, instead of putting these religious practices into a Western theoretical framework without raising any doubt on its compatibility, I tried to form a direct communication between me as an observer and the subject. However, limited by cultural and language barriers, the meaning I understood later through communication with the locals in Mandarin is not the same thing the locals understand in their own language and culture. Therefore, in this essay a multiple possible interpretations on a subject have to be presented in order to "thicken" the meaning behind every religious spirituality.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 198.

In terms of the secondary sources, I applied content analysis to the county gazetteers and other written texts in order to systematically classify and extract useful information.<sup>69</sup>

**Syncretism and supersessionism as expediencies:**



Figure 2. The circular pediment of the Cizhong Cathedral (茨中天主堂) on which Matthew 11: 28 is written in Latin: “*Venite ad me, omnes, qui laboratis et onerati estis.*” (Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden.) Photography by Shuyan Huang.

Living in a multi-religious and ethnic environment, Tibetan Catholics are in a state of a sporadic conflict between two or more religions, and there has been interesting evidence indicating that they are actually syncretizing various religious ideologies into an idiosyncratic way of expression to comprehend the reality — syncretism.<sup>70</sup>



Figure 3. The Baihanluo Cathedral (白汉洛天主堂). Photography by Shuyan Huang.

First and foremost, syncretism is manifested on both the exterior and interior decor of the Catholic cathedrals. The most compelling examples are the Cizhong Cathedral and the Baihanluo Cathedral (白汉洛天主堂) in Dimaluo (迪麻洛), which are two of a few original cathedrals built by the missionaries and preserved intact until today in the Tibetan regions. In Figure 2. the circular pediment is a Western architectural idea whereas the colorful

<sup>69</sup> Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath, *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 318.

<sup>70</sup> See M. Steele Ireland, “Syncretism,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by W. A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2008). “Religious syncretism is a phenomenon that occurs when diverse elements from religious traditions blend... These may clash with a religion’s belief system, but if the result is a fusion of thought in which conflicting elements are brought together and reinterpreted to form a new harmony, this is called syncretism.”

linear embellishments are traditional Tibetan paintings. In Figure 3. the bell tower in the middle is an inheritance of Western Catholic style, and the rest of its design is a combination of Chinese and Tibetan culture. The exterior paintings are more Tibetan whereas the up-pointed cornices are a traditional Chinese architectural characteristic.

Besides the cathedral's decor styled in a Western and Eastern fusion, Tibetan Catholicism emphasizes family lineage in a syncretic fashion as well. In terms of family lineage, Chinese Catholicism has been built upon a concrete sense of continuity from the Biblical patriarchs to their own familial ancestors to contemporary Chinese Catholics themselves. Chinese Catholics substantiate the abstract idea of the Biblical lineage to a realistic blood tie connecting themselves to these Israelite prophets, which gives them a sense of security and historicity.<sup>71</sup> This deeply integrated concept of a continuum of family lineage has been assimilated by Chinese especially rural residents through traditional



Figure 4. A Tibetan Catholic gravestone. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

Chinese culture specifically Confucianism, local folk religions etc. This traditional Chinese ideology happens in accordance with Catholic doctrinal emphasis of family, both of which have intertwined to form an idiosyncratic expression.

In Tibetan Catholicism, one of the best manifestations of this syncretic genealogy is Catholic gravestones on which reliefs represent a hodgepodge of religious motifs influenced by

Catholicism, Confucianism, Daoism, Tibetan Buddhism and folk religions. In the center, the name

of the buried and the names of other family members, both the buried person's ancestors

<sup>71</sup> Madsen, *China's Catholics*, 26.



The concepts of “world construction” and “world maintenance” are cornerstones of Peter Berger’s theory of a dialectical process between individuals and society through which human beings create society and society redefines human beings. This whole process has been completed through three stages: externalization, objectivation, and internalization.<sup>73</sup> Religion is a major part of the world construction, and it “implies the farthest reach of man’s self-externalization, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings,”<sup>74</sup> which is called cosmization. Since Catholicism, as an alien religion, was introduced by the missionaries to Tibet, it had never been a part of the world construction for native Tibetans until the 19th century. By the time Tibetans first encountered Catholicism, Tibetan Buddhism had already developed into a sophisticated form and integrated into Tibetans’ daily life. The missionaries, as a nexus between Tibetans and God, manifested the sacred Catholic world to them. In other words, Tibetan Catholics in the first place did not participate in externalizing their worldview into erecting this giant enterprise actively but merely assimilate it passively. The externalization process never originated from their indigenous culture, which had laid various latent problems threatening the survival of Catholicism in the future.

Despite a maimed externalization process, the successful objectivation compensated the inadequacies of externalization, and Christianity was presented as a much more sophisticated and powerful truth than any other previously existed religions and beliefs by the missionaries. Through translating the Bible into a Tibetan version, establishing schools, curing patients, and introducing a variety of amazing technologies to these isolated

---

<sup>73</sup> See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1967), 4. “Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again with physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness.”

<sup>74</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1967), 28.

peasants,<sup>75</sup> the abstract idea of Christianity had been objectified and substantiated by the missionaries into a tangible and omnipotent entity which transcends the mundane world. For these Tibetans living in a backwater, everything said, brought and presented by the missionaries was a startling feat comparable to a theophany. Another unneglectable reason precipitating their conversion could have been that since geographically these communities are located on the peripheral areas of Tibetan regions, they might have been despised by mainland Tibetans both economically and culturally while remaining ethnically distinct from their Han neighbors. Embracing Catholicism would be the best option for them to establish a local solidarity and a collective identity against external threats.

However, the internalization process required an individual internal transformation including theological comprehension and a cultural accordance between Christianity as a Western religion and Tibetan culture as a predominantly Buddhist and Confucian fusion. This much more individual process was hampered by people's illiteracy and cultural discrepancies. Although Catholicism had supplanted Tibetan Buddhism, it has not been fully internalized by these converts whose subjective consciousnesses have remained heterogeneous. In other words, they have ordered their discrete and chaotic experience by resorting to not only Catholicism but other religions and beliefs available as well. The meaningful order, *nomos*,<sup>76</sup> imposed by Catholicism is alloyed with Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and various other beliefs. At the initial stage of the Catholic rootage in Tibetan areas, the charisma of these multilingual, adventurous, and faithful missionaries definitely played the predominant role in securing Catholic *nomos* in these converts' minds.

---

<sup>75</sup> Francis Khok Gee Lim, "'To the Peoples,' Christianity and ethnicity in China's minority areas," in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural perspectives*, ed. by Francis Khok Gee Lim, 105-120 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 109.

<sup>76</sup> See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 19. "A meaningful order, or *nomos*, is imposed upon the discrete upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or *nomizing*, activity."

The future survival and prosperity of Tibetan Catholicism also largely depends on the Fathers' capabilities, faith, charisma, and negotiatory tactics.

The tumultuous history of Tibetan Catholicism has proved its perilous situation. Historically there have been insurrections against Catholicism like "A Dunzi Jiaoan" (阿墩子教案)<sup>77</sup>. For converts from Buddhism to Catholicism, this psychological and ideological shift of cosmos from the Buddhist Karma to the Catholic Trinity takes time to adjust. A convert from Cizhong whose Catholic name is Luosai (罗赛)<sup>78</sup>, confided to me:

"My ancestors were from Sichuan Province (四川省) and we migrated here. We family was not Catholic originally but I converted to Catholicism after my wife who was a Catholic, was married to me. I read the Bible and understood this religion. If we had conflicts over religions, how could we name our children (whether or not gave them Catholic names)? If you don't listen to your wife or your wife doesn't listen to you, the family is not gonna work. Therefore, within one family, there must be one surname and one religion, so I chose to be a Catholic."<sup>79</sup>

Luosai was not born into a Catholic family nor was he familiar with Catholicism before his conversion, so he, as a representative of a group of Catholics who have believed in or affected by other religions, has to rely upon syncretism as an expediency to maintain the unsound Catholic cosmos. He also tries to convince himself Catholicism is more logically and historically verifiable than Tibetan Buddhism, which shows supersessionism:

"Based upon the Bible, Catholicism has an unambiguous timeline traced backed from Adam to Abraham to Moses to Jesus Christ, and the calendar is based on this timeline. This can prove Catholicism is authentic, whereas Buddhism does not have a clear timeline."<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> See *Deqin County Gazetteer* (德钦县志), (Kunming: Yunnan Minzu Press, 1997), 329. "Jiaoan" (教案) is a specific term for religious strife between Christian religions (i.e., Protestantism, Catholicism and Orthodox) and local resistance in China. A Dunzi Jiaoan happened in 1905.

<sup>78</sup> "Luosai" is probably "Russell" based upon transliteration. Most Tibetan Catholics are given Catholic names by their local Fathers. They use their Catholic names almost in any occasion including self-introduction, school, work, etc.

<sup>79</sup> Luosai, June 23, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Luosai, June 22, 2018.

Luosai's spiritual problem is probably what the first-generation Tibetan Catholics would have faced. Although Catholicism through the process of objectivation and internalization, has already transformed into a transcendent reality and reappropriated people's subjective conceptions of this world to accord with Catholic doctrines, this dialectical process is not solid enough to withstand any undermining impact.

Through the course of world construction and maintenance, the originally discrete and chaotic experience has been ordered by religion into an understandable, sacred and ontologically justifiable cosmos. Religion expresses the objective nomos which is the worldview through religious doctrines, and the worldview is internalized by religious socialization to become individual and subjective ordering of experience, the personal ethos.<sup>81</sup> In this way, individuals are able to understand their unique and personal biographies by incorporating a commonly shared religious nomos. Living in a pluralistic environment, converts and inborn Tibetan Catholics have either internalized or at least confronted anomies<sup>82</sup> from Tibetan Buddhism, Catholicism and other folk religions. Having claimed to be a Catholic does not guarantee a full extent of internalization and subjectivization of the nomos provided by the Catholic doctrines like what happens to Luosai, Syncretism and supersessionism, both of which are naturally developed maintenance strategies, have sustained the plausibility structure<sup>83</sup> of Tibetan Catholicism from crumbling.

## 2. Tibetan Catholicism as a Trademark of Uniqueness:

Although Berger's social construction theory expounds the phenomena of syncretism and supersessionism in a dynamic social context, it does not capture the entire "thick

---

<sup>81</sup> See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 19-28.

<sup>82</sup> See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 23. Anomy, elements which break down the nomos, has infiltrated every aspect of religious people's life to interrupt and sever the dialectical process between the society and the religious.

<sup>83</sup> See Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 45. A plausibility structure is "a social base for the religion's continuing existence as a world real to actual human beings."

description” underneath these practices. F. K. G. Lim argues that Tibetan Catholicism could be just an ascribed religious identity which does not impose a great extent of psychological or theological significance upon its subjects.<sup>84</sup> Catholics who were born into Catholic families or participated in Catholic rituals do not necessarily assimilate Catholic doctrines,



Figure 6. Luosai and his wife are watering their vineyard. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

but they draw “symbolic boundaries”<sup>85</sup> between them and non-Catholics for more pragmatic purposes. These symbolic boundaries are drawn through their syncretic and supersessionistic spiritualities. One of the major reasons driving them to do this is to obtain material benefits from tourism by emphasizing their religious uniqueness.<sup>86</sup> The Father of Cizhong Cathedral said, “They (Catholic villagers) charge an exorbitant price. Tourists who expected that Catholics would be charitable and peaceful, are all dismayed.

Tourists do not want to stay longer... The closer the hotel is to the cathedral, the higher the price is charged.”<sup>87</sup>

Catholicism has become a selling point which has attracted thousands of domestic and foreign tourists who want to see these esoteric Catholic villages hidden inside a Buddhist territory. Not only does the cathedral become a tourist site, but other derivative products have also been sold, among which red wine is the most lucrative business — the profit is approximately 1500 US dollars/yield compared to 200 US dollars/yield for corns.<sup>88</sup> They name their red wine “Honey Rose” which is allegedly a breed brought by the French missionaries. Besides Catholics, non-Catholics have plunged into the wine business as well.

---

<sup>84</sup> Lim, “To the Peoples,” 114.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>87</sup> Yaofei, June 25, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Luosai, June 24, 2018.

Since 1980 when Tibet was reopened to the outside world, millions of tourists have been attracted to this land of purity, bringing tremendous wealth for Tibetans and the local government.<sup>89</sup> The booming tourism industry has enticed the government to keep funding



Figure 7. The construction site in Cizhong (茨中) for hotels and residential areas. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

establishing tourist facilities and infrastructure for example, the expansion of the Gonggar Airport for 268 million RMB and many villa complex projects for 600 million RMB.<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, the symbolic boundaries manifested by Catholics' distinguishing practices of syncretism and supersessionism help them to form a religio-ethnicity.<sup>91</sup> These communities are located on the periphery of Tibet where people from

different ethnicities coexist with each other, including Tibetan, Nu (怒族), Han, Lisu (傈僳族) etc., so Catholicism as a cultural glue ties different ethnicities to each other. The whole formation of Tibetan Catholicism as a distinct religio-ethnicity has been completed based on five steps prescribed by Lim. Firstly, the dominant ethnicity — Tibetans — was chosen by the missionaries as the target population for evangelism. Secondly, the Bible was translated into the dominant local language — Tibetan. Thirdly, the ethnicity has been shaped and solidified by a shared history and tribal solidarity — the martyrdom of the missionaries as a commonly shared history. Fourthly, they concentrate in a particular geographic area — Tibetan-Yunnan borders. Finally, familial ties strengthen the religio-ethnicity as well.<sup>92</sup> In

<sup>89</sup> Cingcade, "Tourism and the Many Tibets," 250.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>91</sup> Lim, "To the Peoples," 115.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 118.

other words, Tibetan Catholics, instead of being an ethnically defined group, are culturally identified by sharing idiosyncratically syncretic and supersessionistic features.

***A sacred world centered upon a cult of personality:***

Although Catholicism itself is an age-old, sophisticated and gigantic institution, Tibetan Catholicism which has only lasted approximately two hundred years is still in a relatively primitive state. Its legitimacy largely stems from a charismatic authority which is still in the progress of institutionalization. Max Weber defines “charisma” as:

“A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.”<sup>93</sup>

These charismatic figures who are alive, deceased, or just exist in the Bible have solidified and sustained Tibetan Catholicism through a series of social and political vicissitudes. Within Tibetan Catholic communities, there are three types of personalities revered and worshipped: the biblical figures such as Mary, Jesus, and prophets, deified leaders like the French missionaries who died as martyrs, and contemporary respected Fathers.<sup>94</sup>

In terms of the first category, the reason why these Biblical figures are endowed with charismatic titles is that in Tibetan Catholicism their functionalities have extended beyond a mere ritual, worshipping or spiritual dimension. In the eyes of Tibetan Catholics, Mary and Jesus as living charismatic leaders are facilitating them on daily matters. And

---

<sup>93</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. by A. M. Henderson and T. Parsons, ed. by T. Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 358-9.

<sup>94</sup> Tibetan Catholic Fathers are usually mid-age males either assigned by the government or from the local areas after having been educated at a theology school. Unlike conventional Western Catholic Fathers who are mainly responsible for ecclesiastical duties, Tibetan Catholic Fathers, especially charismatic ones, take care of all requests from his *xingzhong* (信众, followers) ranging from marriage strifes, food scarcity, political pressure, birth to farming. These Fathers are more like literal “fathers.” Therefore, I prefer the terminology of “Father” instead of “priest.”

interestingly enough, viewing Jesus as a strict ruler, Chinese Catholics are more inclined to seek for the Virgin Mary who represents a warm and compassionate dimension.<sup>95</sup> Through centuries of development, assimilation and indigenization, a zealous devotion to the Marian cult has been deeply ingrained in Tibetan Catholicism and the rest of China as well, which has been a constitutive part of Chinese Catholic identity.<sup>96</sup>



Figure 8. At the house of Lusheng (露生), a Catholic at Yanjing (盐井), a one-hundred RMB note is attached on a statue of Virgin Mary. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

On a popular level, local Catholics' obsession with Mary and their pragmatic mentality have entitled Mary as a god of rain, fertility and wealth. In Figure 8. the message is indicated quite unequivocally by attaching the statue of Mary with money. In Figure 9. Tibetan Catholics hold a regular ritual to ask Mary for rain, birth and health. The ritual normally lasts two hours which is composed by penitence, collective chanting (nianjing, 念经)

and preaching by the Father. In my opinion, the

Tibetan Marian Cult instead of an original spirituality

derived from Tibetan Catholicism, has connections with a prevailing fanaticism toward Mary in mainland China.

Individually, Chinese Catholics are eager to accept the Virgin Mary due to Mary's similarity to the Buddhist Guanyin and the Eternal Mother of northern Chinese secret

<sup>95</sup> Madsen, *China's Catholics*, 88.

<sup>96</sup> Jeremy Clarke, *The Virgin Mary and Catholic Identities in Chinese History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 9.



Figure 9. A group of Tibetan Catholic women are kneeling in front of a marble statue of Virgin Mary, praying for rain, birth and health. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

societies.<sup>97</sup> Sociologically, the Marian cult is able to solve some of the spiritual and institutional impasse caused by the external tumultuous circumstances. Chinese Catholics have been raised on catechesis that stresses the importance of receiving the sacraments for achieving salvation.<sup>98</sup> However, a scarcity of priests has always been a problem for the Chinese Catholics, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Without priests or proper institutions,

women, usually the Catholic nuns, mothers and grandmothers, have taken the responsibility to teach

the Catholic catechism<sup>99</sup> and baptize newly born babies.<sup>100</sup> It is said if an infant dies after receiving this home baptism, the child will go to limbo instead of heaven. Some Catholics think that this kind of “provisional baptism” needs to be completed through a formal baptism, administered with all the proper ceremonies.<sup>101</sup> However, a fanatic dedication to Mary helps to reconcile and solve these procedural problems. Holy Mother Mary is characterized as being warm and kind to everyone, just like one’s own mother. Therefore, women baptizing their children symbolizes Mary bringing salvation directly to the newly born baby, outside of the institutional structure of the Church.<sup>102</sup>

Besides legitimizing the “provisional baptism,” the Marian cult also plays a significant role in one’s personal path to salvation. Although many Catholics believe that the

<sup>97</sup> Madsen, *China’s Catholics*, 88.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>99</sup> Ji Li, “Chinese Christian Virgins and Catholic Communities of Women in Northeast China,” *The Chinese Historical Review* 20 (2013): 22.

<sup>100</sup> Madsen, *China’s Catholics*, 88.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

sacraments, properly administered by a priest, are the primary channels of receiving grace and getting salvation, in practice, they are more reliant upon Mary. Catholics in northern China are given a colloquial name, “Old Rosary Sayers,” because they spend more time reciting the rosary to Mary than attending Mass.<sup>103</sup> For Tibetan Catholics, the rosary is also one of the most frequently recited prayers along with the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>104</sup> This frequent repetition of prayer has already been integrated into the locals’ daily life cycle, during which the meaning of words does not matter at all but this action arouses a spiritual state beyond worldly experience.

At a societal and communal level, especially during tumultuous periods, Catholics have elevated Mary to a protective figure of the whole Catholic community, about which various stories of the Marian apparitions have circulated. There are shrines to Marian apparitions across China, some of which become major pilgrimage sites, such as the shrine at Sheshan(佘山), near Shanghai, and at Donglu(东闾), near Baoding(保定).<sup>105</sup> Take Donglu for example: during the Boxer Uprising,<sup>106</sup> the Catholics of Donglu were under the Boxers’ ferocious attacks, so they organized private militia among themselves and mainly appealed to the Virgin Mary for protection.<sup>107</sup> According to the missionaries’ bulletins and reports, the Donglu Catholics said that Mary appeared to them several times during the siege of their church, and these apparitions were crucial in protecting the Catholics from the Boxers between December 1899 and July 1900.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>104</sup> Luosai, June 23, 2018. In terms of daily cycle of prayers, based on one interviewee, Tibetan Catholics have three major prayers — morning, noon, and evening prayers besides prayers at the cathedral and additional minor prayers.

<sup>105</sup> Madsen, *China’s Catholics*, 91.

<sup>106</sup> See June Teufel Dreyer, *China’s Political System: Modernization and Tradition* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2012), 55-6. It was a violently xenophobic movement during the Qing Dynasty. The literal translation of its Chinese name, *yihetuan* (义和团) is “Fists of Righteous Harmony,” and Westerners called it the Boxer Uprising. With anti-foreign ideology, they chanted incantations, believing that they were invulnerable to bullets. They stalked and murdered Western missionaries, Chinese Christians and foreign officials.

<sup>107</sup> Clarke, *The Virgin Mary*, 86.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 86.

During the Cultural Revolution, a church in Donglu was demolished. In the early 1980s, when it was possible to worship in public again, some villagers put up a portrait of the Virgin Mary in an open space where the church had been, and approximately twenty thousand pilgrims came every year to worship in front of the picture.<sup>109</sup> This deeply ingrained idea of Marian apparition is associated with Chinese Catholics' general belief in miracles. Nearly all the devout Chinese Catholics revealed that they had personally experienced miracles by which they had been blessed.<sup>110</sup> The role Mary plays is a medium between God and his believers, so that without any priest nor ecclesiastical rule, Mary manifests miracles on behalf of God to the Chinese Catholics.

In most cases in which Catholic groups are isolated from the mainstream culture, and remain as relatively autonomous and self-reliant communities, personal miraculous experiences are always connected to one's family and community. Without a systematic and hierarchical Church nor an organized state, rural Catholic groups, as primordial communities, are vulnerable to random natural and social forces, so they appeal to improvised coping strategies instead of developing systematic plannings.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, miracles perfectly fit their needs.

Besides functioning as a protection, the Marian cult helps unite people and solidify a community for a specific purpose, usually teaching catechism. A widely accepted notion of the Virgin Mary helped to establish various Marian congregations, known as sodalities.<sup>112</sup> They were prayer groups founded for the convenience of members who lived in remote areas and were deprived of the ability of attending services in church.<sup>113</sup> These congregations began in Beijing in 1609, started by Ricci as a means of deepening the faith

---

<sup>109</sup> Madsen, *China's Catholics*, 91.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>112</sup> Clarke, *The Virgin Mary*, 40.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

life and devotional practice of the Chinese Christians.<sup>114</sup> Since everyone in the group shared a deep devotion to the Virgin Mary, no matter how faithful each member was, they could all unify as a group to assist in the process of catechesis or other things as well.

In addition to the distinctive effects of the Marian cult on both individual and communal spiritualities, the model of the Virgin Mary has inculcated the Chinese Catholic women with a sense of self-worth. Historically, Chinese women had been suffering under a patriarchal society in which the mainstream Confucian ideology proposed wives' absolute loyalty to their husbands. In practice, women had been abused domestically, deprived of various political and social rights, and abandoned by irresponsible spouses. After the story and image of the Virgin Mary had been brought to China by the missionaries, it revolutionized the traditional viewpoints through which Chinese women viewed themselves, especially for female Catholics. Mary's sense of self-worth came from her realization of being chosen by God to deliver Jesus Christ. Although God did not promise her wealth or anything else, she felt glorious and blessed regardless of being an unwed mother.<sup>115</sup> Following Mary as a model, lots of female Catholics thought themselves as the daughters of God and received assurance that their future was predestined by him, from which they derived enormous confidence and courage to take the step and make their own decisions which were outrageously contradictory to the mainstream culture at that time. These extremely pious Catholic women named themselves "*xiao shen nv*" (God's daughter). In 1744, Joachim Enjobert de Martiliat, a missionary, established the Institute of Christian Virgins, where Christian Virgins live and abide by twenty-five rules covering all aspects of their life and service, including recruitment, chastity, separate residence, obedience, work, social activity, no contact with male strangers, modest costume and

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Eunice Low Soek-Peng, "A Historical Model of Spirituality for Asian Women," *Asian Journal of Theology* 30 (2016): 74.

behavior, meditation, and Church service.<sup>116</sup> They were mainly responsible for teaching catechism and assisting the missionaries, which was completely different from what other women were supposed to do. They did not even get married, give births nor take care of the households, which were women's primary duties in a Confucius society. For these virgins, remaining virgin made them precious citizens of the kingdom of God. The sense of self-worth, derived from the faith in God, gave them courage and confidence in living independent and meaningful lives.<sup>117</sup> In some sense, these Catholic Virgins were avant-garde in promoting sexual equality in China, and their main spiritual guidance was the Virgin Mary.

Another aspect being hugely influenced by the tremendous Marian cult is the Chinese religious art, demonstrated especially in Buddhism. From the end of the thirteenth century, artists began to incorporate the Marian cult into Buddhist iconography and statuary.<sup>118</sup> For example, the creation of "child-giving Guanyin" (songzi Guanyin) was influenced by the imagery of Mary carrying the baby Jesus.<sup>119</sup> Surprisingly, the alteration process was very simple: removing the cross from the rosary and replacing it with a tassel, and adding a few Chinese details, such as a high collar and arching Buddhist scarf.<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, Chinese artists started to create their own works based on images brought by the missionaries. A good example is an ink drawing called "Master Cheng's Ink Garden."<sup>121</sup> It features four Christian imageries, one of which is the Virgin Mary. This drawing illustrates how the artists in the Ming dynasty creatively reinterpreted and created Christian arts by incorporating Chinese elements. In the picture, the Virgin Mary is depicted like a normal

---

<sup>116</sup> Li, *Chinese Christian Virgins*, 21-22.

<sup>117</sup> Soek-Peng, *Asian Women*, 75.

<sup>118</sup> Clarke, *The Virgin Mary*, 25.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

Chinese woman, so is the baby Jesus. Their clothes are also very Asian, and there is a Chinese word on their left, meaning “good.”

Even though the Marian cult usually is not as important as the notions of God and Jesus Christ in the traditional Western Catholicism. However, having been brought to China by



Figure 10. One grave for the martyred missionaries. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

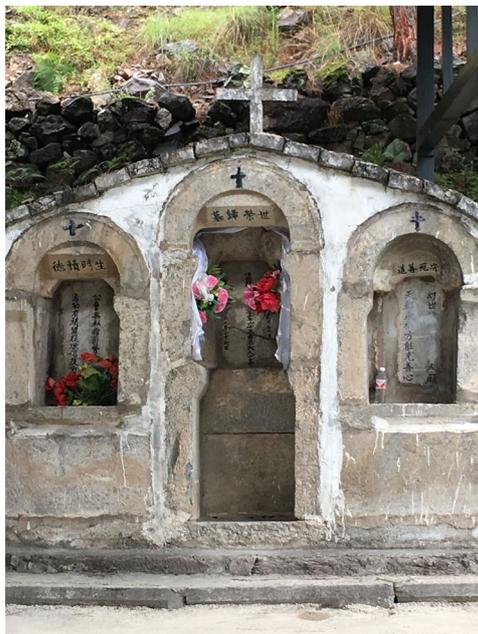


Figure 11. The other grave for the martyred missionaries. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

the missionaries, the Marian cult has received a universal acceptance by the Chinese recipients who usually favor Mary over God and Jesus. This interesting phenomenon has directed the development of Christianity in China, incorporated various native religious and cultural aspects into Christianity, and eventually indigenized Western Christianity into a distinctive offshoot with Chinese characteristics.

The second group of charismatic leaders are also not contemporary living people, but deceased legendary missionaries. Aforementioned, these commemorated missionaries were martyred in the “A Dunzi Jiaoran” (阿墩子教案), and they were buried at the site where the locals hold the ritual asking for rain, birth and health. Interestingly, one of the locals confided to me that they thought these missionaries could still hear their prayers and brought their wishes to God, which means the missionaries have never left their *xingzhong* (信众, followers). Therefore, the locals go to their graves

every single day to recite prayers like the missionaries still holding mass for them. However, beneath this apparent theological and religious reason, there is an anthropological rationale for this practice — due to a shortage of official Fathers assigned by the government, the locals have to pray to these dead missionaries as an alternative.

This notion of believing the dead still exists with us is a traditional Chinese folk religious idea which is popularly practiced especially towards deceased family members. Historically, every Chinese family had an ancestral altar on which there were a number of wooden tablets with the ancestors' names on them. A series of religious rituals were performed to commemorate them, indicating that they still occupied a place in this household.<sup>122</sup> In the contemporary Chinese family, similar rituals are still being conducted in a much simpler fashion, but this idea of visioning the dead has been kept. This idiosyncratic spirituality demonstrates the adaptability and indigenization of Tibetan Catholicism.



Figure 12. The photograph of a revered Father. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

Furthermore, the third group of charismatic figures is contemporary Fathers. Different from Protestant priests, Catholic Fathers play a predominant role in every Catholic's religious life, especially in Tibetan Catholicism. Although most of them are paid professionals usually designated by the Chinese government, their dedication and self-sacrificial spirit to the Church and to his *xingzhong* can really sustain and revitalize this endangered religious minority on the periphery of Tibet. In Figure

---

<sup>122</sup> Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 29.

12. the photograph of one of the most revered Fathers is put alongside the image of Jesus Christ. In Figure 13. Father Ruose (若瑟)<sup>123</sup> who is in the blue shirt holding a drum in the front, is training the band as a means to make the locals more engaged in the church's



Figure 13. Father Ruose (Joseph) is training the band. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

activities. This Catholic band which has regular training three times a week and performances on holidays, is very popular in Bingzhongluo (丙中洛).

Since it was founded by

Father Ruose, it has attracted plenty of young and mid-age Catholic villagers to join.

As an educated, aspiring and energetic Father, besides organizing a band, he has also proposed other reform plans to arouse the vibrancy of the local Catholic community while maintaining the core values of Catholicism. Father Ruose's says:

“Rituals (i.e., the Mass) without being reformed are like the ones before the Emancipation (he means the 1949 Emancipation by the Communist Party from colonization and imperialism<sup>124</sup>). The Church without changing fundamental rules is supposed to reform itself, because young people have different ideas from the elders. We need to provide sufficient activities for them otherwise they will not stand it (the boredom of recitation and attending Mass). Right now, the most horrible thing is that the elders come to the church every Sunday to pray again and again. They pray a lot but the young people do not understand what the elders are saying. Therefore, we have reformed and reduced the prayer to just once before the Mass. We emphasize

<sup>123</sup> “Ruose” is a Catholic name, which is probably the transliteration of “Joseph.”

<sup>124</sup> “before the Emancipation” is a commonly used Chinese idiom which means something trite and archaic.

the Eucharist,<sup>125</sup> so Mass is the essence for us. We also lead them to do other church and charitable activities.”<sup>126</sup>

Instead of sticking to the rules, Father Ruose has decided to make changes because he has captured the psychology of the young people who are the future of the Church in the Tibetan areas. According to my observations, most participants in the band are enthusiastic about learning these modern instruments and hardly miss any training lesson. Father Ruose also invited his friend and theology school classmate, another Father from Hubei Province to supervise the band and assist the training and Mass. After every Sunday Mass, there is usually a social gathering for these Catholics outside the Father’s lodge<sup>127</sup> during which they play basketball, drink rice wine and have lunch together. Off the ritual garment, Father Ruose is really gregarious and caring like a father to these *xingzhong* although he is just in his early thirties.

Not only does Ruose accomplish his ecclesiastical duties and fulfill his followers’ requests, but he also has a broader vision:

“I want to build a complex in which our *xingzhong* could have a variety of activities. However, the land which is supposed to be the Church’s, right now is being used by two non-Catholic families. Because decades ago they were too poor to purchase land to settle down, the Church gave them land to start their life. They are wealthy right now, so they should have given back the land to the Church years ago. The problem is that they got the land use permit from the government, but this land is controversial! I have already appealed to the government and they have agreed to mediate this issue. If the mediation does not work, I will resort to the court.”<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> See Gerald O’Collins, *Catholicism: a very short introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 72. Eucharist is the Greek for “thanksgiving,” which is the “sacrament comes directly from something that Jesus said and did at the end of his earthly life: the institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper. Convergent New Testament traditions support this conclusion: at a sacrificial meal before he died, Jesus invited his disciples to share, by eating and drinking, in his covenant offering to the Father.” Therefore, during the Eucharist, the wafer and wine are transubstantiated into Jesus’ body and blood.

<sup>126</sup> Xiao Ruose, July 22, 2018.

<sup>127</sup> A Tibetan Catholic Father’s lodge is fund raised and built by the local Catholic community, and its location is usually outside the Cathedral.

<sup>128</sup> Xiao Ruose, July 23, 2018.

However, under the PRC Property Law, individuals cannot privately own land and natural resources but can only use it, opposing to the Islamic notion of a perpetual God's property.<sup>129</sup> Even having obtained a piece of land, a church still is not legally entitled to the rights of the land because the Regulations on Religious Affairs state that property of religious entities may not be engaged in the transfer, mortgaging, or development.<sup>130</sup> Similar legal issues also happen to Chinese Muslim communities as well.

Not only is the church's land legally controversial, the vineyards used to be owned by the Church is also under a dispute. During the Cultural Revolution, acres of vineyards owned by the Church of Cizhong were taken and incorporated into the state's property and



Figure 14. Vineyards outside of the Cizhong Cathedral which used to be belonged to the Church, are being managed by the local Buddhists. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

controlled by the local wealthy Buddhists. Whenever Father Yaofei talked about this issue, he was infuriated:” they should have returned it to the Church, because it is the Church's property!”<sup>131</sup>

The notion of appealing to a judicial apparatus is normally not the first option to settle a strife for the Chinese let alone these Tibetans who have limited education and no access to the nearest court given the village's remote location. Referring to Thomas Nimick's idea that geography affects the application and execution of a central doctrine or policy such as

<sup>129</sup> China Real Property Law, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/real-property-law/china.php>.

<sup>130</sup> Regulations on Religious Affairs (*Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*), issued by the State Council, July 7, 2004, effective March 1, 2005, art. 32.

<sup>131</sup> Yaofei, June 25, 2018.

Confucianism, in these Tibetan Catholic villages, its geographical and cultural isolation restricts the communications with the central government and delays the implementation of proper social and judicial mechanisms.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, methods including interpersonal violence, collective action, mediation and feigned suicide are adopted by people to resolve their personal grievances due to a scarcity of judicial resources, the state's encouragement of appealing to informal means and other factors.<sup>133</sup> Regardless of the feasibility, his idea still reveals his vision for the Church and the local Catholic community.

A parallel can also be drawn between a Tibetan Catholic Father and a Hui Muslim<sup>134</sup> cleric, both of whom are deemed as the nexus between the government and the local religious community. Religiously, a Hui cleric assumes the responsibilities of the *iman* (prayer leader) who leads the prayer and the *khatib* (sermon deliverer) who delivers the Friday sermon.<sup>135</sup> Usually, they have done Hajj and studied abroad in another Muslim country, and they have a deep understanding of Arabic and the Qur'an, which enhances their charisma and leadership among the followers. Besides religious duties, a cleric is also the *qadi* (judge) or at least facilitates the traditional *qadi* on issues ranging from marriage, divorce, inheritance to property.<sup>136</sup>

Another major responsibility assumed by the Fathers are mediation. Unlike most Western countries which have largely relied upon legal systems to resolve daily grievances, the Chinese government has resorted to its various extrajudicial apparatuses to address

---

<sup>132</sup> Nimick, *A Twisted Tale of Love and Treachery*, 40.

<sup>133</sup> Neil Diamant, "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in China: Beyond Mediation-Centered Approaches," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, 4 (2000), 523.

<sup>134</sup> See Dru Gladney, "Islam in China: State Policing and Identity Politics," in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* ed. by Y. Ashiwa and D. L. Wank, 151-178 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 154. Hui Muslim (回族) is the largest Muslim community in China. Often labeled the "Chinese-speaking Muslims," Hui are closer to Han Chinese than other Muslim communities in terms of demographic proximity and cultural accommodation. Most of Hui live in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (宁夏回族自治区).

<sup>135</sup> Matthew Erie, "Muslim Mandarins in Chinese Courts: Dispute Resolution, Islamic Law, and the Secular State in Northwest China," *Law and Social Inquiry* 40, 4 (2015), 1008.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 1008-1009.

people's daily issues, among which mediation is a mainly adopted method.<sup>137</sup> Mediators who are usually unemployed mid-age females, are normally assigned by the local government for each neighborhood, and they are responsible for hearing both sides' arguments, mediating, and hopefully providing a mutually satisfactory settlement plan. Within Catholic communities, the Fathers are definitely the most suitable persons as mediators. Father Ruose said:

“There are two households arguing over a land issue. Because it is far from the local police station and people trust me more than the policemen, I assumed the responsibility to arbitrate this strife.”<sup>138</sup>

It also happens to Muslims in China among whom clerics and the elders assume the responsibility of mediators after having taken training sessions and learned educational propaganda by cadres.<sup>139</sup> Even though the party does not recognize the Islamic law, these designated Muslim leaders may be allowed to refer to *shari'a* if it is the most satisfactory way to settle the dispute.<sup>140</sup> Meanwhile, through propaganda educations, the party still ensures that a loyal and safe Muslim is given the authority to mediate whose ideology is politically correct. This process of formalizing mediation within Muslim communities exemplifies the state's tactic, “opening one eye while closing the other.”

#### *A Mighty Father or a Local Magistrate:*

According to the Freudian psychoanalysis of religion, this trans-religious dependence upon a religious leader reflects a psychological clinging to a powerful father-like figure.<sup>141</sup> Everyone's intimidating impression of helplessness in childhood lasts throughout his/her

---

<sup>137</sup> Benjamin Read and Ethan Michelson, “Mediating the Mediation Debate: Conflict Resolution and the Local State in China,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, 5 (2008), 757.

<sup>138</sup> Xiao Ruose, July 23, 2018.

<sup>139</sup> Erie, “Muslim Mandarins,” 1014.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 1018.

<sup>141</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by W. D. Robson-Scott, ed. by J. Strachey (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 47.

life, and there is always a desire for protection through love provided by the father. This psychological clinging to the father later transcends to a devotion towards a much more powerful and omnipotent figure such as God.<sup>142</sup> However, the child-and-father relationship, described by Freud, is ambivalent:

“But the child’s attitude to its father is colored by a peculiar ambivalence. The father himself constitutes a danger for the child, perhaps because of its earlier relation to its mother. Thus it fears him no less than it longs for him and admires him. The indications of this ambivalence in the attitude to the father are deeply imprinted in every religion.”<sup>143</sup>



Figure 15. A Tibetan Catholic woman is confessing to the Father through the window on the stone wall. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

Therefore, instead of Jesus and Yahweh who are just but retributive, Marry who represents mercy and kindness, becomes the most popular and worshipped idol who is attributed with a variety of titles and powers. Same for the martyred missionaries whose legend has become a part of Tibetan Catholics’ identity, they are deified as the communities’ protectors. In terms of the contemporary Fathers, they are the most crucial figures who really maintain

the “religious illusion” in Freud’s term. Given limited education and illiteracy, most Tibetan Catholics desperately need a Father who is able to interpret the Bible for them and protect them from daily temptations from commercialism, Buddhism, and socialism.

Every Sunday, there is always a long queue of people waiting for confession, which usually takes an hour to finish. In other words, their religious faith has been more established upon

---

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 34.

a personal relationship with the Father rather than a spiritual and transcendent love towards God. Another fact which validates this personal rather than spiritual connection with Catholicism is that Tibetan Catholics prefer Tibetan Fathers over Han Fathers.<sup>144</sup> The reason is that they would have more affections and intimacy to a Father who shares an identical ethnicity with them. Based on my observations, the only Han Father who although has fulfilled his duties, engages with his *xingzhong* not as well as his Tibetan counterparts do because of language and cultural differences.

It is the Father who presides the Mass, demarcating the sacred from the profane. It is the Father who has sanctified the cathedral again after the Cultural Revolution, which would otherwise become dilapidated. It is the Father who reignites a sense of sacredness in these Catholics' minds towards Catholicism. It is the Father who, in a religious garment, carries out the sacrament in an age-old cathedral, making his *xingzhong* feel a *mysterium tremendum* — a feeling described by Rudolf Otto as “sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship.”<sup>145</sup> The idea of *axis mundi* — the Center of the World — and *imago mundi* — the paradigmatic creation of the gods — are also manifested and experienced by every single Tibetan Catholic through the Father's presence in the cathedral.<sup>146</sup>

However, as mentioned before, the Father also assumes a variety of other responsibilities such as negotiating with non-Catholics and the government, taking care of legal and financial issues, and arranging social activities. In other words, *xingzhong* need the Father for psychological purposes no less than for practical matters. Similar to the cult of Mary and the martyred missionaries, people's requests from them are mainly birth, wealth, rain, and health. Although psychological reasons and material needs are interdependent upon

---

<sup>144</sup> Yaofei, June 25, 2018.

<sup>145</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 12.

<sup>146</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 56-7.

each other, a certain degree of distinction needs to be made in accordance with the idea of a “thick description.” Any particular intent of the subject, which stems from the phenomena, has to be scrutinized and differentiated from others.

Therefore, the Freudian model is too limited to explain all intentions by the subject. Instead, in my opinion, the Father, like a Biblical patriarch, is responsible for both mental and physical requests from his *xingzhong*. He, with enough vision and capability, has to carry the entire community upon his shoulder to go through a series of tribulations. However, the government has not institutionalized the priesthood in these remote Catholic villages, so many Fathers who chose to stay in these villages, have not been assigned by the government. This voluntary and random priesthood has not guaranteed the Father’s quality nor solved the scarcity of Fathers in various communities.

### ***A Clash of the Sacred and the Profane:***

#### ***1. A Collapse of Charisma:***

Recently, there has been news about sexual harassments committed by various Catholic Fathers, which has severely jeopardized the reputation of the Catholic Church and affected people’s expectations and trust with their own Fathers. Similar incidents also happen to the Tibetan Catholic Fathers as well who are corruptible just like every single one of us.

There are two residential Fathers in Cizhong: one is a Han Chinese named Yaofei and the other is a Tibetan named Yongping Ma. During the whole week I stayed there, I did not see Father Ma once and I was told that he had gone out for some business for a whole week already. Later Father Yaofei told me that:

“Father Ma is from the local area and all villagers like him because he is a Tibetan. They bought him a car. He does not serve or work but only wants to rest and take benefits from others. Every Sunday he is always invited to dine with the locals because he is a Tibetan. Even though he has made mistakes, villagers do not hold him

accountable. He has connections with local officials and the administration of the local Church. They are all relatives! They consult Church affairs without notifying me in advance and make decisions on their own. Right now, the Church has some money, so they want to use it to decorate the cathedral by putting up eight huge LED screens. These things are all expensive and they are wasting people's donations. Father Ma travels a lot and he does not care about the Church's work. Who knows where does he get money to afford his huge expenses!

Father Ma once organized summer bible study courses for kids. He invited a female Catholic from the mainland here to teach in Mandarin but these kids are all Tibetans who do not speak Mandarin properly. He himself did not even show up. The curriculum was all about Biblical history and theology. Even adults feel bored learning these stuff let alone kids!"<sup>147</sup>

Later the interview of another villager named Stephen, who is the accountant of another cathedral supervised by the Church of Cizhong, corroborates Father Yaofei's "allegation:"

"The local Father has his parents and relatives here, so we do not trust him (he implies the possibility of nepotism). We prefer Father from other places. As for the local Father, usually people do not criticize him openly, but in private people do not trust him, especially among the elders...(Because the local Father does not serve his followers) people are flustered. He has to be a role model!"<sup>148</sup>

Therefore, the respectful image of Father as a bridge between God and common Catholics has collapsed, which is the most destructive force destroying the Tibetan Catholics' faith fundamentally.

## 2. Hans Supremacy:

It is never the case that the Tibetan catholic villages are a pure minority enclave for Tibetan catholics. With the booming tourism industry, there is a huge influx of Han people from other parts of Yunnan province and the rest of China to do business in these villages.

---

<sup>147</sup> Yaofei, June 26, 2018.

<sup>148</sup> Stephen, June 27, 2018.

Therefore, ethnic relations and interactions between Tibetans and Hans are also essential in shaping and influencing Tibetan Catholicism, because through these interactions and sometimes conflicts Tibetan Catholicism as an identity has encountered tremendous challenges.

Stevan Harrell parallels Hanness in China with Whiteness in the US,<sup>149</sup> which “is an unmarked characteristic that can be delineated only in contrast to an ethnic other.”<sup>150</sup> In my opinion, Hanness of China is much more hegemonic and exclusive than Whiteness in the US both physically and ideologically. First of all, Han population is categorically the largest in China which counts over 90% of the total population. Secondly, there is not an independent and well-funded organization representing the interests of the ethnic minorities in China. Thirdly, the majority of the minority groups have already internalized the idea of being the “weaker ones” and the “others” instead of seeing themselves as being equal with Hans. The government and most Hans view themselves as the legitimate leaders and vanguards saving the “barbaric minorities” out of poverty and incivility. This feeling of superiority has made Hans who live among the Tibetan Catholics, draw a clear ethnic boundary between them and Tibetans. A Han woman who is a Buddhist from Dali (大理), Yunnan Province, says:

“Apparently, Buddhists and Catholics coexist harmoniously, but in fact Buddhists never go to the Catholic cathedral nor do Catholics go to the Buddhist temple. Intermarriage between two religious parties is almost impossible. We are here and they are over there.”<sup>151</sup>

However, Luosai’s case aforementioned is contradictory to what this Han woman says. The main reason could be that Luosai was born and raised in this area, whereas this woman is

---

<sup>149</sup> Stevan Harrell, *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 295.

<sup>150</sup> Susan Blum, “Han and the Chinese Other: The Language of Identity and Difference in Southwest China,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan.

<sup>151</sup> A restaurant owner in Cizhong, June 22, 2018.

a migrant. Based on my observations, the majority of Hans living in the Tibetan Catholic communities are migrant construction workers and business people like the woman who are new residents. This intrusion of Hans who have brought in other religious traditions, materialism, tourism, and secularism, has complicated the pure and unitary Catholic environment.

Recently, because of a series of dam constructions being undertaken on the Lancang River (澜沧江), downstream villages will be inundated and villagers in these villages who are all Hans, are forced to be relocated to Cizhong. In order to accommodate these new immigrants, the government has purchased most lands and vineyards and razed them to the ground to give space for housing. Most villagers whom I interviewed expressed their disappointments and complaints towards this governmental project. Yaofei, the Father of the Cizhong Cathedral told me that:

“Right now, the villagers do not have any vineyard or land to grow crops. The number of tourists have plummeted from 2-300 per day to 2-30 per day. New immigrants have posed a tremendous threat to the local Catholic communities.”<sup>152</sup>

Without financial sources from tourism and winery, these villagers are entirely dependent upon the governmental subsidies. The most pressing issue is the imminent hundreds of Hans households from the downstream villages, who are either Buddhists or Communists. After the arrival of Hans, the Tibetan Catholics will become a religious minority in their own homeland.

### 3. The Interference of the State:

Due to this gigantic dam project on the Lancang River, almost all villagers in Cizhong have lost their vineyards and lands which had been their financial sources for decades.

---

<sup>152</sup> Yaofei, June 22, 2018.



Figure 16. The greenhouse built by the state and was given to Alysa who has planted all sorts of plants as she likes. Photography by Shuyan Huang.



Figure 17. The pigsty provided by the state, which has never been used. Photography by Shuyan Huang.

Villagers have to purchase other lands which have not been confiscated, but the state still wants to manipulate how these lands are being used. Luosai has purchased another small piece of land after having lost his ancestral farmlands inherited from his family. However, expecting a high demand of food by the incoming influx of immigrants, the state is asking villagers including Luosai to plant food crops such as vegetables and corns, instead of cash crops like grapes. In order to encourage villagers to plant these less profitable crops, the state has built greenhouses and pigsties for villagers, but no one is obeying the

government. Alysa, a Tibetan Catholic farmer, says: “the state-sponsored vegetables and pigs will not be sold well. I do not do these things.”<sup>153</sup> She later told me that her pigsties were empty and she had planted whatever crops she wanted in the greenhouses instead of the specific kinds suggested by the government. Therefore, the dam project and the governmental mandate on farming have significantly impacted and threatened the Tibetan Catholic communities’ normal socio-economic life.

Not only has the government deprived people in Cizhong of their rights and means of making a living, but also Tibetan Catholicism has confronted extraordinary oppressions

---

<sup>153</sup> Alysa, June 24, 2018.

imposed by the state. In Bingzhongluo, Father Ruose of the Zhongding Cathedral (重丁教堂) used to organize Bible study classes during summers for the local children but the state had shut down the program several years ago.<sup>154</sup> Currently, there is still one geographically isolated village, Dimaluo, in which both the Congni Cathedral (从尼教堂) and the Baihanluo Cathedral (白汉洛教堂) are still taking risks to hold Bible classes for kids regularly. Teachers are either local nuns or volunteers designated by Catholic communities in other provinces.

At the Congni Cathedral, I met a volunteer from Guangdong Province (广东省) which is a southern Catholic stronghold in China. Along with the local nuns, she designed a comprehensive summer curriculum for the local kids. The curriculum contains Bible study, movie appreciation, schoolwork tutelage, and most interestingly, prevention of sexual harassment. The volunteer told me that it is important for children to learn about sex especially how to prevent being sexually harassed because the outside world is complicated and dangerous.<sup>155</sup> I was surprised to see that a Catholic summer program held in a secluded village includes the prevention of sexual harassment, which does not even appear in the curricula in schools in major Chinese cities. There are also volunteers teaching at the Baihanluo Cathedral and the Caidang Cathedral (才当教堂) with the local Fathers. Father Ruose explained the continuation of Bible study program at these cathedrals to me:

“People in Dimaluo (where the Congni, Baihanluo, and Caidang Cathedrals are located) are willing to resist the governmental pressure. Kids’ parents have to take care of their farming and ranch during summer, so kids are unattended. Therefore, parents are willing to send their kids to the summer Bible study class.”<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Xiao Ruose, July 23, 2018.

<sup>155</sup> Volunteer, July 26, 2018.

<sup>156</sup> Xiao Ruose, July 23, 2018.

Therefore, people in Dimaluo have shown their determination which has forced the state to compromise, which indicates that the sustainability of Catholicism requires popular support and insistence on their belief. Additionally, this successful organization of Bible study courses also proves the idea of “*minjian*” (民间) proposed by Matthew Erie who uses this concept in discussing the interactions between Chinese Muslims and the state.

The dynamic relationship between Muslims and the state is mainly due to a phenomenon called *minjian* which literally means “between people.”<sup>157</sup> Given the fact that Islam has been rooted in Chinese culture for centuries, its coexistence with the state is a dialectical process in which the state regulates Muslims as much as it needs Muslim communities for certain purposes. Therefore, *minjian*, instead of being like a civil society which is an antithesis of the state, is more like a non-governmental institution which has functioned to preserve the stability, prosperity, and Muslim cultural continuum. People in Dimaluo have consolidated their collective requests through forming a *minjian* entity to counterbalance the governmental pressure. They have a leadership by the local Fathers who interact with the government, and other Catholic communities, external sources in forms of volunteers and fundings, and most importantly, solidarity which makes sure people’s unitary voices are heard by the state unequivocally. Thus, from the case of the Bible study courses, the interactions between the state and the Tibetan Catholic communities are sometimes dynamic instead of a complete antithesis or antagonism, but the state’s interference is clearly detrimental to the survival of Tibetan Catholicism.

#### 4. Transnational Connections:

---

<sup>157</sup> Matthew Erie, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 12.

It is almost one year after I did this ethnographical fieldwork, but I still remember what Luosai said to me that his greatest wish was to visit the holy city of Jerusalem as a pilgrim.



Figure 18. Father Nicholas in the middle. Photography by Anna.

Catholicism as one of the oldest and the most internationally and historically connected denominations, has made Luosai and other Tibetan Catholics situate themselves in the global and historical Catholic communities even though they may not even know where the Pope resides.



Figure 19. A group of Catholic pilgrims from France and Switzerland. Photography by Anna.

Fortunately, while I was conducting research in Dimaluo, a group of Catholic pilgrims from France and Switzerland were there led by Father Nicholas. Father Nicholas told me that he has come to China for

almost ten years and each year he leads a group of Catholics to go the exact same route walked by the missionaries two hundred years ago which is known as the “missionary trail.” The “missionary trail” links several Tibetan Catholic villages together, so in the end they will visit almost all the Tibetan Catholic communities in this region.

Anna who is the owner of the hostel where I stayed in Bingzhongluo told me that it is not surprised to see foreigners who are either tourists or pilgrims. Although they speak

different languages and have distinct cultural backgrounds, she thinks that these foreigners are as close as her family members because they are all Catholics. This ideology of global Catholicism embraced by most Tibetan Catholics who have not even travelled outside of this region, demonstrates that this transnational processes have influenced their individual theologies and perceptions towards the world as well.

As mentioned before in the introduction, because of the Sino-Vatican tension, there is a division within the Chinese Catholic central leadership that some members are pro-Vatican whereas others are pro-state. This antagonism is also shown in local dioceses and individual churches. Father Ruose confided to me that:

“The situation of the Church in Yunnan (云南省) (where most Tibetan Catholic communities are located) is complicated. The leading Father in Kunming (昆明) — the capital city of Yunnan — has not been recognized by Pope Francis. Every church has to obey the Pope even though China has not established a diplomatic relationship with the Vatican yet. We shall not make mistakes in matters of principle, so we cannot coexist with Kunming (the Church of Kunming). Deqing (where Cizhong is located) still follows Kunming, so Deqing is different from us (he means that the Church in Cizhong is making religious mistakes).”<sup>158</sup>

This political rift originated from an international and diplomatic level has even infiltrated into the Tibetan Catholic communities among which each Tibetan Catholic Father disagrees with each other on the basis of theology and political orientation.

Therefore, from this section we can see that besides the internal dynamics within the Catholic communities, there are other external influences such as the state interference, international Catholic connections, a threat posed by both Hans and Buddhist majorities, and internecine conflicts among local Fathers. Although these relevant forces have perplexed the entire picture, they further prove the importance of a dialectical process

---

<sup>158</sup> Xiao Ruose, July 23, 2018.

between a charismatic leadership and a resistant and improvising popular support. Only through a collaboration between capable and united Fathers and a group of uncompromising and improvising followers along with the supports from both international and domestic Catholic communities, are the sustainability and prosper of Tibetan Catholicism achievable.

**Conclusion:**

Therefore, syncretism and supersessionism, as a means of maintaining the Catholic cosmos, have defended Tibetan Catholics from the invasions of anomies from other religions and modernism. Additionally, because of its syncretic and supersessionistic spiritualities, Tibetan Catholicism distinguishes itself from other local religions for material benefits and identity recognition. A cult of personality, as another major feature, is manifested on the Virgin Mary, the martyrs, and the contemporary Fathers, indicating people's strong psychological craving for fatherly love. Besides alleviating people's psychological insecurity, a Father, who is literally the "father" of his *xingzhong*, is supposed to solve problems from all aspects of their life.

In addition to these two major religious characteristics of Tibetan Catholicism, there are other forces influencing the survival and sustainability of Tibetan Catholicism. The governmental interference and Hans supremacy are threatening to this minority religion. Having international connections with the Vatican and other countries are both opportunities and danger, which has entangled Tibetan Catholicism with a century-long political debate as well as providing outside help. In my opinion, the most essential and decisive factor is how the Fathers, who are supposed to be role models and faith leaders, behave. An internecine struggle among Fathers is more detrimental to Tibetan Catholicism than any other factors, because people's faith will crumble fundamentally if their own

Fathers are corrupt. However, we also see a tremendous unity from people in some villages who dare to oppose the state's ban on Bible study courses, and Catholic volunteers from other parts of the country have come to these remote villages to offer their help as well. Therefore, a popular support is also significant in sustaining Tibetan Catholicism.

The essay is able to show that *the survival and sustainability of Tibetan Catholicism largely rely upon a dialectical relationship between a charisma of the Church leadership and an improvisation and indigenization of Catholic spiritualities by the Tibetan Catholics.* Of course, words like “dialectical” and “spiritualities” are open to multiple interpretations, which is what I intend to do given the richness and depth of the phenomena that I saw and experienced. Geertz's Two-Stage Interpretation of Religion opens up various paths for me to view a religious phenomenon instead of shoehorning an Asian religious tradition into a Western theory. It is the beauty of the cultural analysis which enables us to expand our usual conceptions to go beyond a formalist thinking of religion.