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Understanding the Catholic Church in China under Interwoven Discourse:

Starting with a Reflection on the Different Paradigms of Commemorating the Shanghai Council

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Abstract: The year 2024 marked the 100th anniversary of the *Primum Concilium Sinense*, also known as the Shanghai Council. Despite a limited number of publicly available articles for this centenary, two classic narrative paradigms—inculturation and cultural aggression—have reemerged. The first paradigm highlights the Church's dedication to spreading the Gospel and establishing a native Church during the Council, rather than engaging in colonization as suggested by the latter. This paper analyzes the historical facts and viewpoints emphasized under these two paradigms concerning the Shanghai Council, noting that in the actual cultural and societal realm, the paradigm of cultural exchange has become the foundation for dialogue between these two conflicting discourses. The author argues that the significance of the Shanghai Council has been underestimated and calls for multi-perspectival analyses. Just as the existing inculturation and cultural exchange paradigms have shaped our understanding, alternative frameworks, such as modernization or nationalism, can also yield distinct and novel interpretations of this pivotal event.

Keywords: *Primum Concilium Sinense,* Inculturation, Cultural Aggression, Cultural Exchange, Modernization, Nationalism

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Introduction

Inspired by Pope Benedict XV's apostolic letter *Maximum Illud*, approved by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and organized under the mediation of Celso Costantini, the first Apostolic Delegate to China, the first Catholic "Shanghai Council" (*Primum Concilium Sinense*) was held in Shanghai from May 15 to June 12, 1924. This was a milestone in the history of Catholic mission in China and an important symbol of the inculturation of the Catholic mission in China. However, the significance of this council has been far from fully explored.

On the occasion of the centenary of the Shanghai Council, commemorative events were held in Milan, Rome, and Macau in May and June 2024. Although I am not a historian, I submitted a paper offering a theological reflection from the perspective of *sensus fidelium* (Zhu 2024) when attending the Macau commemorative event. During the commemorations, I observed that two narrative paradigms were covertly wrestling with each other. The first narrative focuses on the Catholic Church's efforts toward decolonization, particularly its development through inculturation in China. The second narrative adopts a cognitive framework that reduces the missionaries' work to cultural aggression tied to colonialism and imperialism.

Indeed, scholars have long interpreted the history of Christianity's introduction to China through the paradigm of cultural exchange—a perspective notably advanced by studies on Jesuit accommodation and Sino-Western intellectual interactions. But the evolution of academic concepts does not seem to have had such a direct impact on the Church. Therefore, starting from these two contrasting reflective paradigms observed in the commemorations of the Shanghai Council, this paper explores the delicate situation of the Catholic Church in China under the intertwining of various factors and discourses. It endeavors to use the reality of cultural exchange as a dialogical foundation for these conflicting discourses, suggesting that the experience of the Shanghai Council has long been underestimated. Looking forward, just as the existing inculturation and cultural exchange paradigms have offered valuable insights, applying paradigms of modernization or nationalism could yield distinct and novel interpretations of the Council's legacy.

I. The Inculturation Paradigm of Understanding the Shanghai Council

In various articles commemorating the First Council of China, namely the Shanghai Council, two distinct narrative paradigms are prominently visible. The first approach emphasizes that the Council was a deliberate effort toward

decolonization, demonstrating the Church's firm stance on dedicating itself to spreading the Gospel (rather than engaging in colonization) and establishing a native Church through inculturation. The inculturation efforts of the Council are discussed across several key dimensions:

First, participants universally affirmed the visionary insights and tireless efforts of Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini, whose contributions were indispensable to the smooth convening of the Shanghai Council. The speeches of the Pope, Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, and Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle all highly praised the foresight of Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini (1876–1958). During the organization and proceedings of the Shanghai Council, Archbishop Costantini clearly articulated that the Church's objective was to establish a native Church that both respected Chinese culture and deeply integrated with Chinese society through inculturation, therefore avoiding becoming an instrument or representative of foreign forces (Cernuzio 2024; Tagle 2024b). He emphasized the importance and urgency of cultural accommodation in the missionary process. At the practical level, the Church reduced its reliance on foreign missionaries by training native clergy and consecrating Chinese bishops, serving as a concrete practice of inculturation. Simultaneously, the Church established direct dialogue with the Chinese government, striving to resolve the Church-state issues free from foreign interference. These strategies not only ensured that missionary activities were harmonized with China's national interests and cultural background, but also safeguarded the Church's independence and autonomy within Chinese society.

Second, the conciliar decrees of the Shanghai Council—namely, the *Primum Concilium Sinense Anno 1924*[1]—specifically stipulated the direction of inculturation efforts. Regarded as an important document functioning as a code of canon law for the Chinese Church, this text was formulated with reference to the 1917 Code of Canon Law, approved by all participating bishops through their signatures, and ratified by the Holy See in 1926. As a detailed set of rules guiding all aspects of the Chinese Church's work, the first part *Normae generales* (Basic Principles) explicitly stipulated the missionary policy: the primary purpose of the mission is to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples and to prepare a Church composed of native clergy (17); missionaries "must abandon and stay away from inappropriate worldly concerns and all

1 This document began circulating privately in the summer of 2022 after Leopold Leeb translated it from Latin into Chinese, and remains an unpublished manuscript document.

political affairs" (22), and should not "despise local customs". Subsequent sections—such as Part Two (*De personis et officiis* / Personnel), Part Three (*De Rebus* / Practices), and Part Four (*De evangelizationis opere* / Evangelization)—envisioned and regulated various dimensions of inculturation, including the cultivation of native clergy, the establishment of the hierarchy, and the founding of educational, cultural, and institutional undertakings.

Furthermore, regarding the outcomes of the Shanghai Council, by 1926 the first six native bishops were consecrated; by 1933, the number of native bishops had increased to 23, and mission territories rose from 58 in 1922 to 119. There were 2,367 foreign missionaries and 1,647 native priests. In addition to the major seminaries in Shanghai, Yanzhou, Beijing, Ningbo, Datong, and Chongqing, regional major seminaries were successively established in South China, Kaifeng, Lianghu, Taiyuan, Xuanhua, and Kunming, accommodating 541 foreign seminarians and 607 native seminarians, alongside 1,831 foreign religious sisters and 3,319 native religious sisters. The number of the faithful also grew from 2.21 million to over 2.7 million (Liu 2008, pp. 468–469; Leeb 2022, p. 6). Both the Milan and Macau conferences featured papers discussing the subsequent inculturation movement of the Catholic Church, and these achievements, in a sense, demonstrate the effectiveness of inculturation policies.

Finally, Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (promulgated on November 30, 1919) served as the ideological source of the Shanghai Council, which in turn functioned as a gathering to implement its vision. The Council decree *Primum Concilium Sinense Anno 1924* explicitly states that both past and present intentions and desire of the Holy See for the missions—namely, the will to evangelize and establish a native Church—have remained unchanged (17). However, following World War I, accompanied by the rise of nation-states, the inculturation of the universal Church emphasized in *Maximum Illud* received an unprecedented response across various mission territories, giving rise to a rich and diverse pattern of local adaptations. In *Maximum Illud*, Benedict XV sharply criticized the practices of certain missionaries:

> We have been deeply saddened by some recent accounts of missionary life, accounts that displayed more zeal for the profit of some particular nation than for the growth of the kingdom of God. We have been astonished at the indifference of their authors to the amount of hostility these works stir up in the minds of unbelievers. This is not the way of the Catholic missionary, not if he is worthy of the name. No, the true missionary is always aware that he is not working as an agent of his

country, but as an ambassador of Christ. (Benedict XV 1919: 20)

He further pointed out that such flawed missionary work would only produce the consequence of "a faith that is alien to no nation on earth" (20), leading local populations to immediately suspect everything the missionary does. Moreover, "such a situation could easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people and that anyone converted to it is abandoning his loyalty to his own people and submitting to the pretensions and domination of a foreign power." (19) In short, detaching themselves from imperialist colonizers and advancing inculturation in evangelization became the shared understanding of the Roman Catholic Church—from the Holy See to the local Church in China—and served also as the core mission set forth by the council.

II. The Cultural Aggression Paradigm

Conversely, the second narrative paradigm commemorating the Shanghai Council attributes the history of missionaries from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century to a model of colonialist and imperialist cultural aggression. This paradigm has a long historical pedigree. The *Manifesto of the Anti-Christian Student Federation*, the declaration marking the beginning of the Anti-Christian Movement, explicitly stated the core tenets of this view: modern Christianity was described as a "demon" assisting capitalists in oppressing and plundering the proletariat, while the establishment of churches and religious organizations aimed to turn Chinese people into the "running dogs" of capitalism (Manifesto 1922, see Ding 2020).

As the Anti-Christian Movement deepened, critics not only linked Christianity with capitalist economic exploitation, but further accused it of defending capitalist ideology, serving as a tool of cultural aggression against China, and acting as an "opium" that anesthetized the populace. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, similar discourses continued to be invoked. As stated in the white paper, "Catholicism and Protestantism, which were known as foreign religions in China, had long been controlled and utilized by colonialists and imperialists. The establishment of this principle conforms to the historical trend of the Chinese people's search for national independence and liberation, to the demands of the times to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, and as a result religions in China have taken on an entirely new look, winning widespread understanding, respect and support of friendly religious believers around the world." (State Council 2018)

In recent commemorations of the Shanghai Council, the shortcomings of

missionaries criticized by Benedict XV were framed in the first narrative approach as problems that the Council actively confronted. However, in the second narrative approach, the relationship between the council's reformist stance and the historical problems it sought to address was obscured. For instance, a keynote speech by Bishop Shen noted:

> Western missionaries came from far away to China and, by habit, intentionally or not, they followed the Western model of church-state relations to compare with and measure church-state relations in China, which created a number of problems. Particularly after the Opium War, some missionaries had a strong sense of European cultural superiority and even intended to use the Christian religion to change Chinese society and culture, to which many Chinese inevitably objected and even hated; at that time, a strong anti-Christian trend and even a social movement formed among many Chinese scholars and ordinary people. An abyss was created between the Church of God and Chinese society, which prevented the further spread of the Gospel of love among the Chinese people ... (Shen 2024)

Bishop Shen ultimately concluded that due to the ensuing resistance, the Shanghai Council did not bring about immediate and radical changes within the Chinese Church, and that the Catholic Church in China failed to fully extricate itself from foreign powers, leaving it unable to completely shed the label of a "foreign religion".

The influence of anti-colonial and cultural-aggression discourse is evident in this speech. However, compared with contemporary patriotic Catholic journals in China or the unsparing critiques formulated by Father Vincent Lebbe against the French patronage (*protectorate*) and old-school clergy a century ago, the tone here is markedly more moderate. Delivered at an official centenary commemoration, this narrative was accepted and published in full by *Agenzia Fides*, the official news agency of the Holy See, without triggering controversy. Although the anti-colonial narrative remains a dominant fixture of mainstream ideology in China, which the bishop naturally reflected, his speech also acknowledged the genuine inculturation efforts made by Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini and the Shanghai Council itself.

Yet, upon reading the speech, many Chinese Catholics expressed profound discomfort. They argued that as the Bishop of the Diocese of Shanghai, his focus exclusively on the shortcomings of the missionaries and colonial baggage, while completely omitting their contributions to local society, amounted to a distortion of history and an unfair defamation of the

missionaries. An elderly Catholic layperson from Shanghai remarked to the author: "Why not talk about the educational and scientific enterprises run by the Jesuits in Shanghai, which profoundly transformed Chinese society and culture and catalyzed China's modernization? Today's Haipai (Shanghai-style) cultural temperament owes a great deal to those missionaries!" Furthermore, attributing anti-Christian movements solely to human nature—suggesting that missionaries who traveled thousands of miles to China "by habit", "intentionally or not", carried a sense of Western cultural "superiority" and thus provoked conflict—oversimplifies the complex historical dynamics. These generalized moral accusations, lacking reference to specific facts and individual cases, used to be the primary mobilization slogans of anti-imperialist and patriotic movements, and they deserve to be addressed in the following section.

III. Cultural Exchange and the Modernization Paradigm

Indeed, after the Jesuits returned to Shanghai in 1842, in addition to seeking the flock and building churches, they placed a special emphasis on cultural evangelization. In the Xujiahui area, they founded an observatory[2], a

2 The Xujiahui Observatory: planned and founded by Jesuits such as Marc Delchevallerie (1808–1878) and Angelo della Corte (1819–1896), it began meteorological observations at the end of 1872 (serving as China's earliest systematic meteorological observation and forecasting unit), along with astronomical and geomagnetic research. It began providing time-service in 1884, established the Sheshan Observatory on top of Sheshan Hill in 1900, commenced seismological research in 1904, established a branch observatory dedicated to geomagnetic research in 1908, and added gravity research in 1933. It published numerous monographs and specialized journals in fields such as astronomy and meteorology. Not only did it bring advanced science and technology to China, but it also pioneered and developed China's modern disciplines of astronomy, meteorology, and geophysics, while contributing to the global development of related sciences. It was taken over by the corresponding government departments in December 1950.

museum[3], a library[4], and a publishing house[5], among other institutions, and established numerous schools in parishes and dioceses, with ten managed directly by the Jesuits (SHMOLC 2001). However, within a specific political context, the missionary enterprise of Catholicism in China was simply viewed as "cultural invasion"—a typical reflection of imperialism utilizing Catholicism to carry out aggression against China, economic exploitation, spiritual oppression, and political control over Chinese believers, which "must be ended finally, thoroughly, completely, and totally" (GAC 1950). Consequently, in the 1950s, all these cultural, educational, medical, and social service undertakings were handed over to the new government, and the glorious missionary enterprise once pioneered by missionaries began its decline from its peak.

Although some missionaries were nationalists, most of them hoped to end the French Protectorate, establish a direct relationship between the Church and the Chinese authorities, and secure freedom for missionaries and

3 The Xujiahui Museum (Musée Heude): Founded in 1868 by the French Jesuit Pierre Heude (1836–1902), it collected animal and plant specimens from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Southeast Asia. In 1882, the Museum building was constructed. It was merged into Aurora University in 1929, and two years later the Musée Heude was constructed, opening to the public in 1933. It was China's earliest natural history museum and was taken over by the government in 1951.

4 The Xujiahui Library: In 1847, the Jesuits began collecting books at the Xujiahui Residence, and in 1897, the library building was constructed at No. 80 Caoxi North Road. The library subscribed to Western books and periodicals while also placing great emphasis on collecting Chinese local gazetteers, newspapers, magazines, and rare original Chinese and foreign texts. It was taken over by the Cultural Bureau in November 1955, at which point it still held 238,000 volumes—with local gazetteers accounting for 12%, literature, history, and philosophy 56%, and religion 29%—along with 80,000 foreign language books, 167 types of newspapers, and 1,794 types of magazines. It is now a branch of the Shanghai Library.

5 The Tushanwan Press: founded in Shanghai in 1859 by the missionary Émile Chevreuil (1827–1898), it originated as the printing workshop of the Orphanage and Crafts Workshop. Moved to Xujiahui in 1864, it became an important printing institution in modern Sino-Western cultural exchange. Its major publications included *Sinological Series*, which covered works in religion, morality, literature, art, history, and geography, making it one of the most famous publications of the Tushanwan Press. Shanghai dialect works, such as *Lessons in the Songjiang Dialect* and *Dictionary of French, Shanghai, and Songjiang Dialects*, had a significant impact on the study and dissemination of the Shanghai dialect. Other important publications included *Yiwen Lu* 益闻录, *Gezhi Yiwen Huibao* 格致益闻汇报, *Shengxin Lu* 圣心录, and *Shengjiao Zazhi* 圣教杂志.

the faithful (Hon 2024). Addressing the issue of human nature, Dr. Gianni Criveller sharply pointed out that this narrative does not align with historical facts and is excessively negative. Furthermore, having examined thousands of missionary letters, he noted that these missionaries bought one-way boat tickets, selflessly dedicated themselves to the Chinese people, acted as promoters of social progress, and served as vectors of Chinese modernization (Criveller 2024).

Cardinal Tagle also pointed out gently in his speech that precisely because the Shanghai Council and the apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* criticized certain missionaries, believers from certain mission backgrounds felt deeply dissatisfied, accusing the documents of lacking gratitude for the missionaries' work. Cardinal Tagle noted that despite some undesirable phenomena in the mission fields, the holy lives and selfless dedication of numerous missionaries in their apostolic work had always been regarded as fundamental elements of evangelization, cherished and remembered (Tagle 2024a).

The second narrative mode seems very concerned about the "intent to utilize Christianity to change Chinese social culture". However, in cross-cultural encounters, change is not necessarily negative. Scholars point out that exchanges between different cultural regions are often realized through three distinct carriers: war, trade, and evangelization, with the corresponding historical actors being warriors, merchants, and missionaries. In the first two activities, cultural exchange is merely an objective result, whereas religion itself, the core of evangelization, lies at the heart of culture. The cultural content of evangelization is far richer than that of the other two, making missionary work a greater driver of cultural dissemination than that of the other two (Chen 2002). Some scholars have further pointed out that Western missionaries made outstanding contributions to Sino-Western cultural exchange by introducing Western intellectual achievements and educational systems into China, playing an indelible constructive role in China's modernization; in some regions, the cultural dissemination promoted by Western missionaries achieved monumental feats in China's modernization process.

Over the past decade or so, the Jesuits' enterprise in Xujiahui, Shanghai, has been dubbed the "stronghold of Western learning". In fact, within this enterprise, the spread of Western learning and advanced educational ideas became a brilliant hallmark on the city's name card. Surviving sites of various church cultural and educational undertakings continue to be developed, becoming popular trending spots for tourism. Because of the friendship and cooperation between Paul Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), and because Paul Xu was a native of Shanghai, Shanghai possessed a

relatively solid Christian foundation as early as the seventeenth century. Furthermore, supported by the French government—which held the Catholic Patronage in China—the Jesuits developed a vast Shanghai "stronghold of Western learning" in the areas close to the French Concession. During the critical century from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, these institutions promoted modern scholarship and new concepts, playing a pivotal role in China's modernization. They did not merely spread "Western learning"; rather, they integrated "Western learning" with traditional Chinese scholarship, generating a new branch of learning that evolved into "Shanghai-style (*Haipai*) culture". Consequently, scholars prefer to replace the colonial-cultural aggression paradigm with the cultural dialogue and exchange paradigm. Precisely because the narrative constructed by this cultural exchange paradigm has been embraced by academia, the remnants of Catholic churches across various regions have received attention, excavation, and protection over the past decade or more. Regrettably, while academia strives to carve out space for religion, the religious community itself remains timid and cedes this space.[6]

IV. The Underestimated Significance of the Shanghai Council

As Leopold Leeb has noted, the historical importance of the Shanghai Council and its documents have long been underestimated due to various factors (Leeb 2022a).

First, at that time, the Catholic population was only 2.21 million (Leeb 2022a), representing a modest social footprint among a total population of 400 million, with adherents largely concentrated in rural areas. Just as the Church was beginning to root itself in Chinese society through charitable, educational, and medical services, it encountered the anti-Christian movement (1922–1927). The Shanghai Council took place precisely when the anti-religious sentiment was reaching its peak. Nationalists frequently stoked hostility against Christianity and Catholicism, seeking to curb their influence, particularly their impact on the younger generation. Amidst the warlord skirmishes and the subsequent Northern Expedition, the personal safety of missionaries was frequently compromised.[7]

6 Coincidentally, as early as 1993, Pope Benedict XVI—who was then Cardinal Ratzinger—suggested in his address to the Doctrinal Commissions in Asia, titled "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures," that the concept of "interculturality" should replace "inculturation" as well as other models akin to cultural aggression (*alienation and violation*) when discussing the universality of the Christian faith.

7 For example, around the time of the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925, the claims to recover educational rights and prohibit foreigners from engaging in missionary

At the Macau centenary commemoration of the Shanghai Council, Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai reflected on Celso Costantini's efforts toward inculturation, pointing out that the Shanghai Synod itself was an evolving dynamic process. It was not merely an exercise in "listening to culture", but also a crucible where old-school and new-school missionaries reached a hard-won consensus, thereby introducing the perspectives of modernity and nationalism into the assessment of the council (Hon 2024).

However, cognitive differences between new-school and old-school missionaries (Liu 2008, pp. 52–68), such as the exact root causes of these divisions and the demographic proportion of each faction, have yet to receive deep critical reflection in existing scholarship.[8] Under the cultural-aggression paradigm, old-school missionaries who resisted inculturation are often portrayed monolithically as being driven by human failings such as "habit" and "conscious or unconscious cultural superiority". In contrast, scholars like Gianni Criveller, operating within the inculturation paradigm, pushed back with concrete historical evidence. Clearly, reducing complex institutional conflicts merely to personal moral weakness is overly simplistic.

As mentioned earlier, Cardinal Tagle observed that such moralistic accusations had already sparked friction within the church a century ago (Tagle 2024a). It was precisely through Archbishop Costantini's meticulous communication, encouraging missionaries to "heal together through their wounds" and "journey together" through "comprehensive realization of heart and mind", that a genuine culture of "listening" was established within the Church. This fostered constructive dialogue between "proclaimers and listeners" following the traumatic realization of missionary conflicts (Hon 2024).

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work in China intensified, with churches and church schools bearing the brunt of the impact. On March 24, 1927, the Nanjing Incident occurred, in which soldiers looted from foreigners within the city of Nanjing and Xiaguan, and among the casualties were missionaries; however, this event marked the transition of the anti-Christian movement from its peak to its decline. See also Costantini, *The Memoirs of Cardinal Celso Costantini*, Part II, "Cultivating in China, 1926: The Anti-Religious Movement".

8 This issue seems not to have received sufficient critical reflection from scholars, which is why there are various seemingly conflicting judgments. For example, Liu Guopeng points out on page 53 of his work that Bishop Paul Dumond, representing the old-school ideology," was actually in the position of an isolated minority in the Tianjin Vicariate"; however, on page 56, he notes instead that Father Vincent Lebbe, representing the new school, "tried painstakingly to establish an ideal of an indigenous church that ran counter to the majority of missionaries in the Far East".

If human nature alone cannot fully explain why early old-school missionaries allied with the colonial Protectorate and resisted inculturation, alternative historical perspectives must be considered. Archbishop Hon suggested that because the Chinese sociopolitical regime had long been destabilized and corrupt, foreign powers stepped in to restore public order, protect populations from greater disasters, and create a secure environment for pastoral work. Consequently, old-school missionaries adopted protective, defensive postures. This perspective offers a more empathetic understanding of the old-school clergy than the sharp rebukes found in *Maximum Illud* encyclical or the unyielding verdicts of the cultural invasion paradigm.[9]

Today, public discussion frequently revisits the tumultuous Beiyang era, exhibiting a special fascination with the constitutional experiments that followed the fall of the Qing dynasty. That era was characterized by multiplicity of competing ideologies, whose prospects were ultimately derailed by warlord fragmentation and political corruption, such as Cao Kun's election bribery scandals.[10] In their pursuit of national independence, Chinese intellectuals naturally embraced modern political concepts infused with anti-Christian sentiments (Chen 2010, Tao 2003 & Zhao 2019), even though a broad sympathy for Christianity still existed, as evidenced by the successful

9 Same as the previous note. This view seems to implicitly suggest the following perspectives: (1) Missionaries who endorsed the *Regium Exsequatur* (or the protectorate of missions/*padroado*) were not necessarily nationalists; rather, this was a result of their experiences in China. Moreover, old-school missionaries were greater in number, older, and held leadership positions. (2) New-school missionaries, because they were younger, arrived in China later, and witnessed the reality of bullying by the Great Powers and the trauma of anti-Christian riots (*jiaoan*), identified with the patriotic sentiments and rights of the Chinese people. However, (3) a consensus was finally reached at the Shanghai Council.

10 In 1922, during the First Zhili-Fengtian War, the Zhili clique emerged victorious and gained sole control of the Beijing government. Thereafter, Cao Kun, leader of the Zhili clique, successively forced out two presidents, Xu Shichang and Li Yuanhong, and began plotting to become president himself. Cao Kun spent 13.5 million yuan distributing money to members of parliament, handing out payments ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 yuan each, and used troops and plainclothes personnel to monitor members of parliament to ensure a sufficient quorum and secure his own votes. The scandal of Cao Kun's election bribery ruined the earliest practice of constitutional democracy in China. Ironically, however, it was entirely flawless in form: first, the parliament that elected him was legal; second, the procedures by which he was elected and the number of votes he ultimately obtained complied with the rules, at least in form. History repeatedly repeats itself, leaving constitutional democracy infinitely far away.

convening of the 11th Conference of the World Student Christian Federation at Tsinghua University in March 1922.

Interestingly, in the "fourth wave of colonial nationalism" (Anderson 2005) following World War I, not all Asian and African countries displayed hostile attitudes toward Christianity. In South Korea, for instance, a unique synthesis of Christianity, nationalism, and patriotism emerged, wherein Christianity was viewed as spiritual repository of Western power and endowed with the mission of national salvation.[11] In short, the era of the Shanghai Council was a time of immense possibility. Caught between the Anti-Christian Movement, the anti-imperialist agitation, and broader nationalist demands, the church faced the dual possibility of amicable accommodation or fierce confrontation.[12]

Placed in a grander historical context, the emergence of nationalism forms an integral component of "modernity", while modernity is frequently linked with secularized "disenchantment". Both Weber and Troeltsch believed that various spheres of modern social life—whether state sovereignty, economy, science, art, the family, or the individual—uphold the principles of rational freedom and stand in opposition to ecclesiastical authority, particularly the Catholic Church. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Church found itself compelled to critically engage with modernity. In the eyes of early modernization theorists (often operating from Protestant backgrounds), the "disenchantment" of the world began with the Reformation, proceeding progressively from the rejection of the Catholic Church to the rejection of Christ, the rejection of God (atheism), and ultimately the negation of humanity itself.

Undoubtedly, modernity posed a profound shock to the Roman Catholic Church, which resisted modernistic incursions up until the Second Vatican Council. Politically, moreover, the Papal States were in manifest decline as Italian unification sought to establish its capital in Rome, a political standoff

11 South Korea has even developed a profound enculturated Christian theology. For instance, during bible translation, the traditional cultural name for the supreme deity, "하느님 Haneunim" was used to translate "God" thereby resolving confrontation and exclusion into identification. (Su 2018)

12 As Celso Costantini noted in his autobiography, *Ploughing in China* (Part Two), in his pastoral letter to the vicars apostolic nationwide dated March 9, 1923: "Current trends dictate that: (1) We must seize the opportunity and make full use of our present freedom. (2) The new China is undergoing a transition, and whether it will become an enemy or a friend of Christ remains undecided. (3) There is an urgent need to establish good schools to prevent the poison of Western materialism." (Costantini 1992)

that was only resolved with the Lateran Treaty of 1929. Facing hostility from Chinese society and complications from the French *padroado*, the Holy See maintained a strictly non-partisan stance. As early as 1922, Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini summarized his own position and that of the Holy See as follows:

> The Apostolic Delegate is purely religious and should not possess any political color. The Holy See does not meddle in politics; even when politics occasionally intrudes into the religious sphere, it is accidental and transient. The Holy See has no imperialist ambitions in China, and the Great Powers politics have nothing whatsoever to do with the Holy See. The Pope cares for China, ardently desires for China to grow strong, and maintains that China belongs to the Chinese. (Costantini 1992: 1922)

Even under such challenging circumstances, the *sensus fidei* expressed by the Shanghai Council remained remarkably clear: opposing the *padroado*, supporting the anti-colonial movement, strengthening the formation of local clergy, expressing genuine care for the Chinese people, respecting Chinese culture, and honoring traditional Chinese virtues. These were not demands of a political compromise, but rather the authentic dictates of the evangelization mission.[13]

Furthermore, the Synod's canons explicitly stipulated that foreign missionaries were prohibited from participating in the political and commercial activities of their home or host countries, and were barred from joining political associations without explicit episcopal exemption. These rigorous missionary regulations ensured that the church and its clergy would not be misconstrued as holding ulterior political motives, allowing them to renounce any alliance with certain political forces.[14]

Faced with Western modernity, the Catholic Church seemed to carry a natural original sin; simultaneously, facing surging anti-imperialist and patriotic movements (manifested in the Anti-Christian Movement and the

13 In fact, whether it is Pope Benedict XVI or Pope Francis, their letters to the Chinese faithful repeatedly emphasize that the Holy See has no political ambitions whatsoever regarding China.

14 Therefore, how many contemporary Chinese pastors can resist the temptation of being cloaked in political power? How many can endure the pressure of being abandoned and deliberately isolated by political forces? Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin, who was removed from office by the government and remains so to this day due to his "inappropriate remarks" during his episcopal ordination speech on July 7, 2012, resigning from all posts in the Patriotic Association, illustrates this vividly.

Recovery of Educational Rights Movement), Christianity was viewed by the public as an inherent tool of capitalist invasion and imperialist subversion. Yet the guiding vision of the Shanghai Council and its cultural institutions demonstrated that Catholicism could occupy a constructive, positive position within modern East Asian societies, contributing to the awakening and development of national consciousness.

As Charles Taylor's reflection on Catholic modernity reveals, modernity does not necessarily imply disenchantment. Rather, by transcending closed concept of Christendom, the Church embraces the universality and wholeness of the Gospel, affirming that the Christian message should not be "excarnated" (Taylor 1999). As repeatedly emphasized in the encyclical *Maximum Illud*, the Christian proclamation is intrinsically never "foreign" to any nation or human society, the Gospel is suitable not only for Western culture, but can deeply integrate with the cultures of mission territories, allowing Catholicism to wear the diverse faces of many nations while remaining fully rooted within them. "Faith cannot be limited to the understanding and expression of any single specific culture. A single culture cannot exhaust the mystery of Christian redemption." (Pope Francis 2013: 117)

A certain paradox, however, arose when the Pope and his fellow bishops exercised their magisterium to insist that the church must maintain an appropriate distance from partisan street politics. This policy drew a sharp demarcation line between the church and the local political forces claiming to represent the vanguard of "progress". Later, the issuance of Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Ad Apostolorum Principis*, intensified the conflict between the institutional church and mainland ideology.

Although the Vatican subsequently initiated adjustments and opened doors to dialogue, the journey from reconciliation to the full restoration of relations and deep dialogue remains a protracted process. Regardless of these historical complexities, the collective experience, "the experience of this Shanghai Council, as well as the experience of the Second Vatican Council, suggests alternative paths to us: namely, that traditional culture should not self-isolate and form an irreconcilable opposition to other cultures, but should instead remain open, engage in dialogue, and learn mutually so as to benefit all people, rather than merely the elite class." (Tagle 2024a)

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