

Saving History:

The urgent need for collecting historical data on the Catholic Church in China

by Fr. Augustine Lee (Li Jianhua)

Abstract

Analysis of the development and characteristics of the studies of the history of the Catholic Church in China reveals one great weakness: work on archival materials. The challenge of archival work today lies on two fronts: first, in the West, where we find an abundant collection of pre-1949 materials belonging to different missionary congregations, universities, sinological research institutes, the Vatican archives and the archives of the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples; second, in mainland China, where the vast majority of pre-1949 materials preserved in Church archives had been destroyed. The task in the West is to make the archival materials accessible to scholars who would study them for what they can tell us about the past. In mainland China, the task is twofold: the first and the most urgent is to ‘save history’, i.e., by collecting materials that survived the destruction and recording the memory of the surviving eyewitnesses of history; the second is to promote archival work in the Church, i.e., the ongoing preservation of materials that record the events in the life of the Church today for future generations. This paper also introduces the archive of Northern Shanxi Church documents from 1900 to 1949 preserved in the collection of Fr. Li Jianhua.

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I. Introduction.

It is generally accepted in scholarly circles that Christianity made three attempts to enter China in the past. The first was during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) with the coming of Nestorianism or *Jingjiao*, as it was called then in Chinese. The second was during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty () with the arrival in China in 1289 of the Italian Franciscan Giovanni di Montecorvino (1247-1328) and a band of friar-missionaries. Strictly speaking, this marked the beginning of the history of Catholic Christianity in China. The ‘Yelikewen’, as the Christians (both the Catholics and the Nestorians) during the Yuan period were called, would not last for long, however. They would disappear along with the collapse of Yuan rule. Christianity’s next attempt at re-entry would come in the late Ming and early Qing periods, with the arrival of the Italian Jesuits, most notably Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). This time around, it would stay, despite persecutions and other difficulties, never to disappear again. And even though still a tiny minority among the more than one billion Chinese, the Catholic Church has managed to develop its own identity and carve out a place for itself in Chinese society.

II. State and characteristics of research on the Catholic Church in China

For the sake of simplicity, I am marking 1949, the year the Communists gained full control of China, as the line which divides the history of the Catholic Church in China in two stages: a) from its entry into China until 1949; and b) from 1949 to the present.

A. First Stage: from its entry into China until 1949:

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, there were three works regarded as the most representative on the history of the Church in China:

1. *Zhengjiao Fengbao* [], by Fr. Huang Bolu of the Apostolic Vicariate of Jiangnan (1883)
2. *Yanjing Kaijiao Lue* [*Brief Account of the Founding of the Church in Yanjing*], by Pan Guoliang of the Beijing Vincentians (1905)
3. *Tianzhujiao Chuanxing Zhongguo Kao* [*Studies on the Spread of the Catholic Church into China*], by the Jesuit Xiao Jingshan of the Apostolic Vicariate of Xianxian in Hebei (1923)

Scholarly research on the history of the Catholic Church in China began in the beginning of the 20th century. At the time, the Church was undergoing an indigenization movement. In 1913, the famous Catholic Ying Lianzhi founded the *Furen She* (Furen Institute) in Beijing and recruited Catholics to study the Chinese classics. At the same time, he was working with famous scholars Ma Xiangbo and Chen Yuan. They published academic papers on the history of Catholicism, such as the *Taigu Yuanliu Kao* [], the *Yuan Yelikewen Kao* [*Studies on the Yelikewen of the Yuan Dynasty*], the *Qing Siku Zongmulu Pinglun Jiaozhong Zhushu Bian* [], and thus established the historical study of Catholicism as an academic discipline. In 1925, Pope Pius XI permitted the founding of the Furen Catholic University in Beijing (then known as Beiping), and made the study of the Catholic Church in China one of its main tasks. It produced the first group of scholars in the field: Chen Yuan, Zhang Xinglang, Feng Chengjun, Xiang Da, Fang Hao, Xu Zongze and Luo Guang.

Within the church, this development was accompanied by the publication of other historical works and translations. To cite some of the more important ones:

1. *Hubei Xiangyunshu Jiaoshi Jilue* [*Short History of the Church in Hubei's Xiangyun Territory*], by Cheng Hede. Shanghai Tushanwan Yinshuguan, 1924.
2. *Tianzhujiao Chuanru Zhongguo Gaikuang* [*General History of the Entry of Catholicism into China*], edited by the Shanghai Shengjiao Zazhishe Bian (1928).
3. *Shengjiao Shilue* [*Short History of the Church*], by Xiao Jingshan. Xianxian Tianzhutang, 1932.
4. *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao Chuanjiao Shi* [*Mission History of the Catholic Church in China*], by De Lixian [Paschal M. D'Elia] (translated from Italian by Xiao Hua). Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1934.
5. *Xiwan Shengjiao Yuanliu* [*Origin and Development of the Church in Xiwan*], by Long Deli [Valeer Rondelez]. Beiping Sishiku Tianzhutang, 1939.
6. *Bianjiang Gongjiao Shehui Shiye* [*Social Work of the Church in the Borderlands*], by Wang Shouli [C. Van Meleckbeke] (translated by Fu Mingyuan). Shangzhi Bianyiguan, 1947.

In the list above, nos. 2, 3 and 4 belong to the general history category while nos. 1, 5 and 6 to local or partial history.

B. Second Stage: from 1949 to the present:

Within Mainland China

When the Communists took over China in 1949, the Catholic Church entered an unprecedented period of darkness – of repression, manipulation and extermination. Ideologically, it went through a process of vilification and demonization. And for thirty years, from 1949 to 1979, the study of the

history of the Church in China was basically tied up with political criticism. Real historical research was forbidden territory (Tao 1998:56). However, after 1979, as the government implemented reforms and adopted a policy of openness, the Church was able to rise again, and the academic world could begin to view and study the Catholic Church with objectivity. To date, mainland Chinese scholars have done a fair amount of research. In terms of breadth and depth, they have achieved considerable progress. I made a rough estimate of papers published domestically from 1979 to 2000, and the number comes to around 4000. They cover areas such as: general history, period history, local Church history, Church incidents, personalities, East-West exchange. They concentrate mainly on cultural issues, and, on the whole, they use the sociological (social-scientific?) approach: e.g., the relationship between the Catholic Church and society or with modern technology and culture, particularly the topic of modern and contemporary East-West exchanges which is discussed relatively more abundantly.

Within the Church, some old priests had written and published their memoirs in internal Church or local historical and literary magazines. The Catholic Church operates only two publishing institutions: the **Guangqi Press** in Shanghai and the **Faith Press** in Shijiazhuang, Hebei. These two publishers specialize in theology, philosophy and general Church literature. Publishing monographs on Church history remains a highly sensitive issue. In Hong Kong, the **Holy Spirit Study Center** was established (in 1980) to observe, collect, study, and analyze materials on the Catholic Church in mainland China. In Taiwan, Fu Jen Catholic University's **Catholic Historical Institute** was founded in 1999 precisely for research on Catholic Church history. Its tasks consist in the compilation and management of historical materials as well as the publication of historical works.

In the West

After the Communist takeover, all foreign missionaries were expelled from China. Many of these missionaries would later write about their observations and experiences while in China. At the same time, some Catholic research institutes are playing an important role: e.g. the Ricci Institutes of the Jesuits in Taipei, Paris, San Francisco and Macau; the Monumenta Serica Institute of the SVDs in Sankt Augustin, Germany; the Verbiest Institute of the CICMs at the University of Louvain in Belgium (Rule 2004:151). These academic research institutes have at their disposal the vast wealth of material stored in the various archives and libraries of the Western world. From a narrow focus on missionaries and missiological studies, these institutes have gradually expanded into the wider area of East-West cultural exchange and many other aspects of Church history. They have published, mainly in Western languages, a great number of historical monographs and works by important figures in Chinese Church history. The ever-increasing cooperation between China and the West in the wake of China's reforms and policy of openness during the last twenty years has provided great support, in terms of academic research and information, to academic research on Christianity in mainland China, particularly those within the Church.

C. Characteristics of historical research on the Catholic Church in China.

So far, a complete *History of the Catholic Church in China* or an *Encyclopedia of the Catholic Church in China* in Chinese does not exist. The reason for this is threefold: first, not enough research have been done; second, many of the past documents and materials in the West are still sealed (Chen 2003:i); and third, most of the past documents and archives in China have been destroyed or lacking the groundwork for the post-1949 archival collections. Although there are some published histories, short histories, or chronicles of the Catholic Church in China, their contents, except for some minor differences, are essentially the same.

III. 'Saving history' – collection and preservation of historical materials

There is a Chinese saying which goes: "Even a clever woman cannot cook a meal without rice." Archival material is the basic stuff of historical work. Without it, we cannot write history. To do history, we do not fabricate past events. Rather, we take any type of record of the past and subject it to scientific management, study and analysis.

A. Current state of archival preservation of pre-1949 materials in China and overseas.

In China

Due to the political climate between the 1950s and the 1970s, most of the archives and libraries belonging to the different dioceses in China were completely destroyed. The little that survived was severely ruined. In Shanxi Province, I visited all the eight dioceses and discovered that all the materials and books in their archives and libraries perished in the fires of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Only a portion of the archives of the Northern (Shanxi) from the 1900-1949 period survived.

Fortunately, these are not the only ones that survived. There are other Church documents and books that escaped destruction and which can be found today in different places:

1. National Library (Beijing): books and documents from the former library of the Northern Church (Beitang).
2. Hebei University Library (Baoding, Hebei): partial collection of books and documents from the former Catholic University of Jingtu in Tianjin.
3. Ningxia University Library (Yinchuan, Ningxia): partial collection of books and documents from the former Catholic University of Jingtu in Tianjin.
4. Shanghai Library: the entire collection of books and documents from the former Xujiahui Library of the Diocese of Shanghai.

In addition, the Xikai Church in Tianjin keeps several thousands of books and documents published before 1949. Of all the dioceses in China that I have visited, this is where the largest diocesan collection of documents may be found. Unfortunately, they remain sealed away in storage, untouched.

In the West

In the history of the Catholic Church in China, from the beginning until the establishment of the Church hierarchy in 1946, the Western missionaries had always played a central role in the administration of the local Churches. So, in the archives of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (formerly, Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) and of the generalates of various religious/missionary orders and their research institutes, there is a vast collection of pre-1949 material on the Catholic Church in China: letters, reports, statistics, diaries, pictures, Church publications, books, magazines, and writings on a wide range of subjects. When all foreign mission activity was banned in mainland China after 1949, many of the expelled missionaries turned into research, utilizing the abundant resources stored in Western archives. They produced a great amount of historical studies, but mostly monographs and regional histories focusing on a missionary order's mission activity in China. Studies on Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits of the late Ming and early Qing periods are especially plentiful, and work on the materials related to them has never stopped.

B. Scope and emphasis of archival work in China and overseas.

In the West

As pointed out previously, there is a vast amount of pre-1949 material on the history of the Catholic Church in China in the West. Archival materials already destroyed in China were able to survive in various places in Europe and the U.S. The urgent task at hand is to mine and manage this vast resource, and to provide leads as to where the materials we seek can be found and what sort of materials are we dealing with. I cite two important examples of this kind of work:

1. *Christianity in China: A Scholar's Guide to Resources in the Libraries and Archives of the United States*, by Archie R. Crouch, Steve Agoratus, Arthur Emerson, and Debra E. Soled (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989). This work is the fruit of a survey of "over 1,200 libraries, archives, historical societies, religious orders, and denominational headquarters" to ascertain the location of the collections described in the 554 repositories in it. It includes three lists of collections: serial titles (407), oral histories (487), and dissertations/theses; and three indices: subject index (541), personal names index (645), and repository index (703).
2. *The China Archives of the Belgian Franciscans: Inventory*, by Sara Lievens (Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation K.U. Leuven, 1998). This work details the contents of the Franciscan archives in Sint-Truiden related to the activities of the Belgian Franciscans who worked in the Yichang region in the south-western part of China's Hubei Province.

Visiting the archives of several of religious/missionary orders in Europe, I found out that their collections have largely yet to be catalogued. These witnesses to the history of the Church in China remain in deep hibernation, waiting to come out. Religious/missionary communities and archival institutions which own and keep them should go through their collections, catalogue and describe their contents, produce lists and abstracts, and even translate the results of these efforts into Chinese for the benefit of the Chinese Church.

In China

Within the Church, archival work is extremely poor. Between 1949 and 1980, it was virtually zero. After 1980, the Church had been preoccupied with mission and the pastoral care of its flock. For the near empty field of studies on the history of the Catholic Church in the post-1949 China, the eyewitnesses are irreplaceable sources of invaluable first-hand information. But these eyewitnesses are now old and disappearing one by one from the scene. Unless we act quickly to save their memories, a big and important part of recent Church history would be irretrievably lost. This is why I refer to the work of collecting post-1949 material 'saving history' (cf. Smalley and Seton 2003; Wiest 2005).

C. Methods that can be used for collecting archival material.

First of all, every diocese, at every level of the community, should establish an archival office with a full-time staff.

In line with post-1949 developments of the Catholic Church in mainland China, I would divide the archival work into the following:

1. Collecting Church documents and publications: i.e., of pre-1949 materials scattered in private collections and post-1949 materials (books, journals, magazines, pamphlets, etc.) that are publicly available or limited to internal distribution.
2. Collecting pictures and audio-visual records of important people and events.
3. Collecting the personal notes, diaries and private papers of important people.
4. Collecting oral histories: i.e., recording oral accounts of eyewitnesses, particularly the elderly.
5. Collecting government-issued documents on religious policy or laws and regulations affecting the Church.
6. Writing chronicles (diocesan, parish, religious community)
7. Producing a Church almanac detailing information on the following areas:
 - a) Religious activities
 - b) Social services and charitable works. The pre-1949 Church was basically a dependent Church, always reliant particularly on Western financial support. Today, the Church does not only support itself but also active in various social and charitable works (especially among orphans, the handicapped, and AIDS victims) which are having a growing impact in society.
 - c) Church constructions and other building projects. Building new churches is another characteristic of the post-1980 Church. From 1980 to the present, there were about 250 new churches that had been constructed. In my home diocese of Taiyuan (Shanxi Province), for example, there are on the average five new churches built annually.

D. Important resources for archival work today

1. Oral History Method of Jean-Paul Wiest (Chinese Studies Center, Beijing). Oral history is one of the most important sources of archival material today. In the summer of 2002, I invited Prof. Wiest to the Taiyuan Diocese to give a lecture on this topic to a group of priests, nuns, and seminarians from several dioceses across the country.
2. *Rescuing the Memory of our Peoples: Archives Manual*, by Martha Lund Smalley and Rosemary Seton (International Association for Mission Studies, 2003). This archives manual explains in a comprehensive manner the methods of collecting, cataloguing, and preserving materials. It also includes a glossary of archival terms, an ample list of resources for additional information (readings and websites), and information on training opportunities for archivists. It is the most authoritative archives manual today.

We can use these two important resources in starting an archival training program and implementing it in every diocese. Many dioceses still do not have an archival system, and even though some churches in big cities already have archives, they collect mostly government or political documents, and extremely lack materials on Church life. This is putting the cart before the horse! From 2002, I used the classes that I teach in some dioceses, seminaries and convents to conduct six seminars on how to do oral history.

Recently, the Catholic Preparatory Seminary in Shaanxi has organized its students to gather oral histories from the Catholics of the area. Some members of the clergy currently studying abroad are pursuing degrees in history. More and more people now are realizing the importance of archival work and I believe that the combined efforts of many would carry this task forward, laying down a firm foundation and promoting a more in-depth study of the history of the Catholic Church.

IV. Fr. Augustine Lee's (Li Jianhua) 'Catholic Church History Database'

A. Archival materials from Northern Shanxi and Taiyuan

This archive contains original letters of missionaries and parish priests in the ecclesiastical territories of Northern Shanxi and Taiyuan during the first half of the twentieth century (between 1900-1949). One ‘informal description’ describes it as “particularly valuable in the insight it gives the reader into the parish life in the early twentieth century. For unlike the majority of surviving materials from this level which were written by missionaries for a home audience from whom they needed to raise funds, these letters were written simply to inform the bishop of ongoing issues and seek his advice or approval” (Harrison 2006:65).

Background on the history of the dioceses

Shanxi became an independent ecclesiastical territory as an apostolic vicariate in 1844. In 1890, it was subdivided into two territories: the Northern Apostolic Vicariate, with its seat in the provincial capital of Taiyuan, and the Southern Apostolic Vicariate centered in Lu’an (Changzhi). Later, five new ecclesiastical territories would be carved out of the Northern Apostolic Vicariate: the Apostolic Vicariates of Taiyuan (1924), Datong, Shuozhou, Yuci and Fenyang. Catholicism came to this area during the second half of the seventeenth century through the Jesuits. The earliest Catholics were merchants who came into contact with missionaries while doing business in Beijing. These first Catholics – referred to by later generations as the ‘old Catholics’ -- formed the first Catholic Church community that would survive until the twentieth century. From the mid-eighteenth century to 1949, the entire Shanxi territory was entrusted to the care of the Franciscans. During this period, even though most of the clergy in the territory were Chinese, bishops would always come from the ranks of the Italian Franciscans. Before the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, foreign missionaries and Chinese priests worked mainly in the so-called old Catholic areas. However, from 1900 onwards, especially in the 1920s, the Gospel would be proclaimed widely in the territory. The materials preserved in this archive reflect vividly the work of Chinese and foreign missionaries, and provide concrete examples of life in the old Catholic communities during this period.

The archive

To date, the archive has not yet been catalogued. It consists of 93 files some of which contain hundreds of pages of letters while some only a few. There are 84 files of letters from parish priests to their bishop, seven files of correspondence between the Shanxi Northern Apostolic Vicariate (including Taiyuan) and other ecclesiastical territories, and two files of letters from seminarians (studying locally and in Italy) to their bishop. Most of the letters were written in Italian and Latin, and the rest in French, German and English. Some items in the collection are very interesting: e.g., a Chinese virgin’s letter to her parish priest; a late Qing Dynasty passport issued to a foreign missionary.

The 84 files of parish priests’ correspondence give us plenty of material about parish finances and marriage cases. Many letters are about women: e.g., parents refusing to send their daughters to a new school run by missionaries; Catholic virgins refusing to perform tasks assigned to them or always demanding to go home; orphan girls rejecting the husbands chosen for them; mothers asking the parish priest for help in extricating their daughters from unhappy marriages. Some letters are about Catholics who got themselves into trouble: e.g., a Catholic who should be sent to the local authorities for beating his daughter-in-law; a priest’s servant stealing his master’s things and then hiding them in the local Catholic virgin’s room. Finally, there are also letters that deal with internal Church problems: e.g., seminarians being expelled from the seminary and their parents demanding that they be taken back; catechists gambling, smoking opium, cohabiting with their mistresses, or even leading a whole village in renouncing the Church.

- 2004 “Cong Chuanjiaoshi de Chuanqi dao Zhongguo Jiduzongjiao shi” [From Missionary Hagiography to the History of Chinese Christianity]. *Youguan Zhongguo xueshuxing de duihua: Yi Huayixuezhizhi weili* [Scholarly Dialogue on China: Monumenta Serica as an Example]: *The First Fu Jen University International Sinological Symposium September 26 and 27, 2003, Symposium Papers*, edited by Zbigniew Wesolowski. In Chinese.
- Smalley, Martha Lund and Rosemary Seton
2003 *Rescuing the Memory of our Peoples: Archives Manual*. International Association for Mission Studies.
- Tao Feiya
1998 “A State-of-the-Field Paper on the History of Chinese Christianity in the PRC since 1949.” *Jindai Zhongguo Jidujiao shi yanjiu jikan* [Journal of the History of Christianity in Modern China], vol. 1. In Chinese.
- Wiest, Jean-Paul
2005 “Doing Oral History: Helping Christians Tell their Own Stories.” Workshop held at Trinity Theological College, Singapore, 14-18 March 2005.

Appendix 1

There were 28 religious congregations who were in charge of Dioceses, Apostolic Vicariate and Prefecture before 1949 in China (Charbonnier 1989: 13-16):

Short form	Religious Congregation	Nationality and China
1, CICM	Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Scheutists)	Misson Belgian in Mongolia and Shanxi.
2, CM	Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists)	French, American, Italian, Pole, Dutch in Hebei, Jiangxi and Zhejiang
3, CMF	Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary	Spanish in Anhui.
4, CP	Passionists	American in Hunan.
5, CR	Canon Regular of St Augustine	Swiss in Tibet.
6, CPS	Priests of the Holy Stigmata	Italian in Hebei.
7, CSSCC	Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary	French in Hainan.
8, MEP	Foreign Missions of Paris	French in Liaoning, Jilin, Sichuan, Guangdong, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi.
9, MEQ	Foreign Missions of Quebec	Canadian in Jilin.
10, MM	Foreign Missions of Marknoll	American in Guangdong, Guangxi, Liaoning.
11, MSC	Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Issoudun	German in Guizhou.

12, OESA	Hermists of St. Augustin	Spanish in Hunan.
13, OFM	Franciscans	American, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Hungarian, Irish, Belgian in Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hubei, Hunan.
14, OFMCap	Franciscans Capucins	Austrian, German, Spanish in Heilongjiang, Gansu.
15, OFMConv	Franciscans Conventuals	Italian in shaanxi.
16, OP	Dominicans	Spanish, American, German, Pole in Fujian.
17, ORSA	Augustinian Recollets	Spanish in Henan.
18, OSB	Benedictines	German in Jilin.
19, PIME	Pontifical Insitute for the Missions	Italian in Shaanxi, Henan, Hongkong.
20, SCJ	Priests of the Sacred Heart (Betharram)	French in Yunnan.
21, SDS	Society of the Divine Saviour (Salvatorians)	German in Fujian.
22, SFM	Foreign Mission of St. Francis (Scarboro)	Canadian in Zhejiang.
23, SJ	Jesuits	French, Spanish, Austrian, Irish, Hungarian, Italian, American, Portuguese, Canadian in Hebei, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanghai.
24, SMB	Foreign Missions of Bethlem	Swiss in Heilongjiang.
25, SDB	Salesians of St John Bosco	Italian in Guangdong.
26, SSC	Foreign Missions of St Columban	Irish in Hubei, Jiangxi.
27, SVD	Society of the Divine Word (Steyl)	German, Dutch, American in Shangdong, Henan, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang.
28. SX	Xaverians (Parma)	Italian in Henan.

N.B. 16 other Institutes of men were at work in China without having charge of any ecclesiastical territory.