

From Yangjiao 洋教 to Sinicised Catholicism:

Re-Interpretation of the Catholic Faith in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

One aspect of religion that has exercised the PRC from 1949 to the present day is the potentially harmful influence of foreign entities with respect to state security. Since the early 1950s, the state has been determined to remove links between foreign (particularly Western) religious entities and religious communities in China. This has been a significant policy for Chinese Catholics as Catholic Christians were often considered to be less loyal to the CCP than other believers as they have strong historical connections to the Vatican. They often have to face allegations of supporting foreign interests instead of the PRC. Because of a fear of infiltration, the official party historiography has consistently promoted this view through directly linking missionaries and Christian churches to imperial forces. Not only the high representatives of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) but many local priests as well raised their concerns about this issue. They feel that one of the significant problems for Catholics in China is how Catholicism is still by some perceived as a foreign religion, yangjiao 洋教. The church is therefore actively trying to rid itself of such labels by promoting the inculturation/localisation (bendihua 本地化) and sinicisation (zhongguohua 中国化). Since 2015, the Chinese authorities have advocated the 'sinicisation/Chinesisation of religions' (zongjiao zhongguohua 宗教中国化), which, according to the government, should eventually lead to the creation of a harmonious society in China. Similarly, during an annual religious conference in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping 习近平 stressed the need for different religions to be compatible with socialism and therefore to undergo sinicisation. This direction has been stressed ever more urgently since the 19th Congress of the CCP in October 2017. Accordingly, the novelised version of a legal document Regulation on Religious Affairs mentions the need to support socialism and to practice the core socialist values (shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan 社会主义核心价值观). The Catholic priests and missionaries have tried to interconnect the Catholic dogma to the Chinese culture since the beginning of their mission. In recent decades, the trend towards effecting a harmony between the Catholic faith and Chinese tradition is evident in the context of the CCPA. The article analyses how exactly is the Catholic Church (represented by the CCPA) re-interpreting its tradition to meet the governmental requirements as well as to attract more potential converts.