

Chinese Christians' persecutions and migrations: A brief overview

Niccolò Cipollone

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Mobility, Migrations and European Integration

The relations between China and religion span across hundreds of years of history. Being one of the oldest civilizations in the world, certainly played an important part in the development of religious rites and beliefs in Chinese culture. But the symbiotic relation is at peril. While periods of tensions between the various dynasties and religious organisations were common episodes in China's history, it is also true the opposite: religions have always found a fertile ground to spread their roots. It is astonishing to observe that during the Mongolian Yuan dynasty every religion was practiced with no relevant clash between them. How come that nowadays, religion is slowly but steadily being suffocated by the Chinese Communist Party policies? What are the consequences of the alleged religious persecutions and who are its victims? Are we assisting to the death of religion in China? In these pages we will try to answer those questions analysing mainly the situation of the Chinese Christians, while also occasionally compare with other religious minorities such as the Uyghurs and the Tibetans.

Part I – Historical context

The religious landscape of China has always been one of the most diverse in history. And the first records of religious iconographies dates to the 7th millennia BC. But most importantly it gave the base for the development of the Chinese Traditional Religion, as we call it today. To call it a religion would be quite simplistic, for it comprehends not only mythological tales, but also many rights and notion of traditional Chinese medicine. It works as a far more stronger bonding force than the other “classical” religions.

It is only in the 6th century BC that other religions start to spread in China. First Buddhism, from the historical region of Tibet, then came Taoism and Confucianism three centuries later, the latter also becoming the Chinese dynasties states' religion. It is also to note that in that time Christianity also arrived in the Far East plains. Followers of the Nestorian creed, a branch of the Eastern Christian Church, started spreading their doctrines only in the 6th century AD. It is the oldest Christian migration in China currently known. But unfortunately, after a brief period of success radication in north-western China, the creed's presence progressively shranked, until the 900 AD, when it was replaced by Islam. While arriving in the mid-7th century AD, Islam was more successful in establishing new faithful communities, especially in the modern Xingjian Autonomous Region.

Due to China high ethnocultural diversity, many other religions developed all along the course of history. Tengrism, Baha'I, Judaism, Shinto gained more followers because of migratory flows or military conquests. In the end the religious panorama of China in the beginning of the 20th century, presented itself as one, if not the most culturally inclusive country in the world.

The rise and development of Christianity in China was a long and constant process, not lacking critical points. As mentioned previously, from the 6th century AD Christianity spread during many Chinese dynasties. But it is only during the Medieval Age that the religion started to grow. The catalyst for the first success of Christianity, is to be found in the Silk Road. Indeed the ancient network of roads that spanned from Xi'an to Kashgar, from Bukhara to Teheran, from Jerusalem to Venice, and goods were not the only things to travel, but also history, philosophy and of course religion. The 13th century sees the beginning of the first mission in China, ordered by the Holy See. Some missionaries travelled with the idea of finding the mysterious kingdom of Prester John, some to search for the Grail, and others to simply spread the Word of the Gospel. To cite a few missionaries, these were: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, Giovanni da Montecorvino, Wilhelm of Rubruck. Another factor to be taken into account is also the role of religion during those times. In the mid 1200's the Mongolian dynasty of Khublai Khan had successfully overthrown and conquered the Song dynasty and proclaiming the birth of the Yuan succession line. Among the novelties of new ruler's court, was also a tolerance towards any religion present in his vast empire. This aspect was also reported in the *Milione*, the memoirs of Marco Polo's travel in Cathay, written by Rustichello da Pisa during the imprisonment in the now called Yarmutalik, in south-eastern Turkey.

During the beginning of the 1300 and the end of the 1500, no expeditions and missions were conducted by Europeans in direction of the East. Several reasons could be designated as factors of this decadence period such as the last Crusades, the rise of the Ottomans, the endemic fights between the European kingdoms and principalities, the stop of commerce along the Silk Road. A new age for Christianity in China would come only in 1601, when the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, convinced the Ming Emperor Wan Li to grant him the permission to establish a permanent Catholic mission in China, in which he succeeded. Those are years of prosperity and expansion for the western creed, that converts more and more people. But in 1645 tensions rise. One of the most influential Jesuits of China, Martino Martini, in his book, *Brevis Relatio de Numero*, proposed the possibility to add the cult of the ancestors, a well radicated rite in Chinese culture, into the Catholic faith. The Controversy on Rites, as known by historians persisted for more than 50 years and concerned the correct translation of the word *Tiàn* (Heavenly Lord)¹. The conclusion to the Controversy was decided with Pope Clement XIth, condemning the merging in 1701 and restating his decision through the emanation of the papal bulla *Ex Illa Die*.

Obviously, the reaction of the newly established Qing Dynasty was equally strong, and in 1721 the Kangzi Emperor expelled any Christian missionaries or converted people out of China, which led to a period of frozen relation between the Holy See and the Tian Zi. But true changes only arrived in the first part of the 19th century.

1839 is still regarded in China as the beginning of the Century of Humiliation and for many reason. But most importantly it was the beginning of a new era, both for China and Westerners. The 1st Opium War had started and the western supremacy was clear from the start. At its end in 1842, China was forced into signing the first of many Inequal Treaties that imposed the opening of the commerce between Great Britain and the Great Qing. However, with the 2nd Opium War, the position of the Chinese dynasty sensibly worsened. The Peking Convention of 1860 other than imposing harsher trading conditions, also opened the doors of China to other

¹ The translation would not correctly coincide with the term used in Europe for God. The problem resided on the fact that the Chinese word *Tiàn* only addresses God as the Lord of the Sky, the Heavens, while omitting his nature of "Almighty".

western countries, their diplomats and lastly missionaries. After a little over than a century, Christian missions had come back in China with not much approval of the population. In fact, many citizens of the Chinese Empire had grown resentment towards them, even explicitly declaring that the principal trades of opium were not merchants, but missionaries that, hiding behind the excuse of their mission, dealt with the commerce of the narcotics.

Although the hostility sentiment was strong in the years following the Peking Convention, with time missionaries eventually found ways to build a new relation with China's population. Between 1861 and 1899, protestant and catholic mission gained many followers, with estimates counting at least one million of converters in that period. Sadly, for them, 1899 saw a major setback for Christianity and westerners: the Boxer's Rebellion. Members of the Chinese secret societies and kung fu schools, such as the White Lotus Society and the National Righteousness Group (also known as Boxers), revolted against the westerner's presence in China, condemning their imperialistic, some would say quasi-colonialist, approach toward trade and the treatment of Chinese people. During the revolt, estimates showed that at least 32,000 people between Chinese Christian, missionaries and foreign militaries were killed by the revolvers². Though the death toll was heavy, unexpectedly the later years became known as the "Missionaries Gold Age". From 1901 to 1926, the missions grew exponentially, both in follower numbers and in missionaries present in China. With the rapid growth in numbers, came along a growth in influence. Many missionaries' schools, hospitals, orphanages and even universities opened thanks to the pastors works. Their influence grew that much that in the years immediately after the Boxers Rebellion, they were able to successfully influence the banning of the foot binding tradition, which was a practice well established in Chinese and Far Eastern culture since the 10th century AD and was seen as a paragon of beauty and high status for women. Even after the Xinhai Revolution (1911-1912) and the destitution of the Qing dynasty, the missions still thrived, although the newly created Republic of China led by Kuomintang's leader Sun Yat-sen, initially thought of a plan to marginalize Christian influence in China and propose a new awakening of Confucian and Taoist philosophy and doctrine³. Fortunately for the Christian mission, the plan was not successfully implemented thanks to the new course of action of politics taken by Chiang Kai-shek, as new president of the Republic of China. Still resentment across the population was well present.

After the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, in 1919 huge protests sparked across the Chinese Republic. Many young people of different social background, led mostly by university students, demonstrated in the streets to show their disapproval towards the Japanese treaty gains, condemning it as further proof of blatant imperialism. The protest were then known as the May 4th Movement, which to this day is regarded as catalyst for the spread of communist ideal in China. This movement, with other socio-political-economic factors favoured the spread of not only anti-westerners sentiment, but also anti-Christian movement⁴.

Thus, from the end of the 1920's to the end of the 1940's, the mission's influence and presence began to decline. Resentment steadily grew and episode of violence followed against missionaries

² Later they became known as the Chinese Martyrs of 1900, who were then recognized by pope John Paul II the 1st october 2000.

³ Data of the numbers of Chinese Christians after the 1st World War showed that the followers reached more than 2,5 millions converted in 1918.

⁴ A defining event that contributed in this spread, was the due to the incorrect translation of a report made by the World Missionary Conference in 1922. While the report called for a progressive *indigenization* of the protestant mission in China, the title chosen for the English version of the report was "The Christian Occupation in China" which was badly received by the Chinese population, particularly the new communist milieu led by young university students.

and Christians followed. Most notably the decapitation of John and Betty Stam, two American Baptist missionaries, showed how far the sentiment, if manipulated, could have gone. Particularly cunning was the use of the anti-Christian and anti-western sentiments by the Chinese Communist Party. Inspired by the May 4th movement, the CCP was officially founded in 1921 and in 1924 was one of the sides that formed the First United Front, the political and military organisation expressly created to rid China of warlordism during the Northern Expedition (1926-1928). But due to opposite goals between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party sparked a civil war, divided in two phases that started in 1927 and ended in 1949. Said period resulted quite difficult for the continuation of Christian mission in China. With the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the start of the IInd World War, westerners fled back to their home countries, leaving only a few behind. Unfortunately, many of the people that did not flee were either killed or forced into prison. Some studies reports that at least 96 Catholic missionaries were either killed by Japanese or Communists, but the numbers of actual victims are still a question of debates.

As mentioned before, the war did not end in China after Japan's surrender. The second phase of the Civil war between Communist and Nationalist resumed quite immediately. It only in 1950 that the war is declared over with the birth of the new state: People's Republic of China, lead by its paramount leader, Mao Zedong. And the effect of the new Chinese administration on missionaries were visible straight away. After having forced the few remaining foreigners into house arrests, in 1951 Mao ordered the expulsion of all those people, formally closing China to any type of western presence and influence. Thus, ended more than a century of work of western missionaries, that were able to steadily spread Christianity in China.

Part II – People's Republic of China and Religion

The first years of Mao as paramount leaders were difficult and full of reforms, needed to avoid any type of counterrevolutions that could cancel the work of more than 30 years of his life. With the idea to implement the Soviet model of Communism in China, one of the bigger problematics that Mao had to face was religion. In fact, he knew that to achieve a true Socialist Revolution, he had to eliminate any religious reference and creed; but on the other hand, he also knew the risks of achieving such goal. Religion in China was too well radicated among the people, and the risk of opposing to it would have certainly led to a religiously based counterrevolution. Understanding the stakes, Mao opted for a progressive and slow ban of religion almost as if he was accompanying them out of Chinese society. To do that, he needed to have full control on their organisations. With premise, Mao created between 1954 and 1957 the CCP Religious Institutions, which were: the Three Autonomies Church (1954), Chinese Buddhist Association (1957), Chinese Islamic Association (1957), Chinese Taoist Association (1957) and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, CCPA (1957). Of those five associations the most controversial one was the CCPA. The Holy See, received the news of the creation of the new religious institution, had immediately deemed it heretical, and encouraged Chinese faithful to not adhere to the state-controlled church. Many followed the Vatican's words and in these years they gave birth to the phenomenon of the clandestine house churches, which rapidly grew among the population. However, the Religious Associations idea that Mao introduced, would not last even ten years due to the coming of the Cultural Revolution period.

The Cultural Revolution is defined as a tumultuous period in China's contemporary history. For many historians, it is seen as the result of the many failures of Mao's politic. In fact, the country was in precarious state: the rupture of Sino-Soviet relations, the failure (and incredibly high death toll) of the Great Leap Forward, the rise of Chinese intellectuals criticizing the Party's course of action and the progressive loss of influence of Mao among his fellow Party members all played a role in the advent of the revolution. But it is only in 1966 that religions and faithful's situation plummets. Indeed, at the start of the year, a campaign of extirpation of religions is put into motion. The campaign claims to rid China of the "4 Old" that still hinder the country: old habits, old customs, old ideas and old culture. Up until 1969, the masses, following the example of the Red Guards, loot, burn and desecrate all the religious and antique landmarks in China that had any linkage to the 4 Olds. Buildings like the Temple of Confucius in Beijing or its tomb in Qufu, were befouled. While the profanation of sacred grounds was ongoing, religious leaders were hunted down and deported into the Logai, short form of Laidon Gaizao, translated as labour camps. The situation unimaginably worsened in the 1970's, where Mao suspended any type of religious activities, festivities and confiscated various religious goods. But even more extraordinary was the fact that the clandestine home church persisted in these years, gaining even more followers, almost tripling their numbers. Only with Mao's death in 1976, the arrest of the Gang of Four led by his fourth and final wife, Jiang Qing, and the election of Deng Xiaoping as true successor of Mao, that the overall situation in China became to improve for religion.

After his election, Deng had to deal with critical political and economic issues. But he also knew the importance of re-establishing a stable relation between the Party and the people. With his political line of "Boluan Fanzheng" and the introduction of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" doctrine he successfully proposed a path for China to come out of a turbulent period. This doctrine comprised was aimed into opening again the country to foreign relations, including religious ones. During Deng's era, the Paramount Leader reopened the religious associations created by Mao and also freed some of its religious leaders imprisoned throughout the 1950's. But the issue of the Document 19 in 1982, wanting to appease relations most importantly with the Vatican, still put any religious organization and creed under surveillance of the Party⁵. While the change of condition for religious bodies in China was surprising, the Holy See, still diffident of the CCP intentions, persisted into encouraging faithful not to adhere the state-owned churches, and granting more power to their appointed bishop in decisional matters, to solve the communication difficulties.

After Deng, the CCP nominated as General Secretary Jiang Zemin, which in his first years did not changed much of Deng's politic towards religions. If on one hand he took concrete actions into reappease the severed ties between PRC and Tibetans Buddhist, on the other, with the birth and exponential growth of Falun Gong during the 1990's, Deng' successor employed the iron fist to persecute any member of the new creed. Falun Gong is a new religious movement born at the end of 1990 in China, following Li Hongzhi proposal of a new type of qigong teaching that incorporated Taoist and Buddhist elements, meditation and moral philosophy to achieve spiritual enlightenment. The success of the new religion was astonishing. In just under ten years, it grew so popular that in 1999, it was estimated that at least 70 million people were defining themselves as followers of the Falun Gong. Although it professed no violent moral teachings, the CCP could not withstand such a huge organisation inside the state. The problem

⁵ Said document also ordered the restitution of a part of confiscated relics and gave freedom of decision to higher religious bodies about doctrinal and ritualistic matters.

was about the high level of independence that the creed benefited. The potential scenario of having a protest movement born out of such a large organisation was concrete. As a solution, Jiang instituted the 610 Bureau with the sole duty of organising the crackdown of Falun Gong practitioners. Since late 1999, the repression was brutal. Many were incarcerated, tortured and killed, while others were used as organs donors⁶. The repression then sparked as an international controversy, and many NGO and even States condemned the actions of the CCP. Many Chinese citizens, fearing the worst, fled to the US, UK, Spain, Italy and France, where they were given the status of refugees for religious persecutions. The Falun Gong repression is a crucial episode when talking about religion in China because it is since then that the position of religious creeds has been progressively shrunked. But without a doubt, new height in tensions between the CCP and religious communities has been reached during Xi Jinping administration.

When the CCP elected Xi Jinping as its new Paramount Leader, it caused very few reactions both inside and outside China. After solving some political scandals that involved some high-ranking Party members, Xi started to ring a radical change to China political course of action. And the consequences of such changes were also felt by religious groups all over China. Xi's decision on the control of religious groups and creed, brought a new era of tightening controls and extrajudicial actions that with time became increasingly important. In 2018 he successfully proposed a revised version of the Document 19 -now called Regulations over Religious Affairs- that drastically changed the situation of religions. Stronger sanctions were issued for followers of the *xie jiao*, stronger controls over the Grey Market's creeds and bounties were put on all affiliated people to the *xie jiao*⁷. However, in 2020 Xi worsened the condition of the Regulation over Religious Affairs. Firstly he issued the Measure for the Administration of Religious Groups where he constrained all creed not part of the Red Market to conform and spread the CCP ideology and Han culture in combination with their religious creeds. The new measure had disastrous effects on faithful. Studies estimates that more than a 100 million people were persecuted or were at high risk of becoming it. This is especially shown in the recent cases of the Church of Almighty God and the one of the Uyghur minority⁸.

The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is a newly established catholic inspired church born in 1991. As of today, it is the single most persecuted religious creed in China, with over 300,000 followers arrested in the last three years. The reasons of such massive repression is still object of controversies. Since the beginning of the 21st, the CAG has been involved in many controversies in China, such as the mass kidnappings of 2002, the doomsday protest of 2012 and even in murders and assaults of common people. In front of such episode, the actions of the CCP weren't late and showed an example to all the estimated four million followers of the creed. Nonetheless, even with the crackdown of CAG going on, some believers manage to escape and reach other

⁶ The number of organ donation that happened in China from 2000 to 2006 increased of 42,000 absolute donations.

⁷ Based on Chinese sociologist Fenggang Yang studies (2006), the CCP categorizes all the religious associations in China into three groups: the Red Market, in which the religious association fully recognized and sinicized are permitted by the Party to preach, the Grey Market (the biggest group) where creeds and religions that are not recognized by the Party but do not constitute a peril for the society are, the Black Market (also called *xie jiao*) where churches and creed are considered of extreme peril for people and the CCP and thus must be crushed.

⁸ The Uyghur minority is the one with the highest rate of Muslim followers. The population, which are inhabitants of the historic Eastern Turkestan region have always been not very compliant of their central government authority, either under the Chinese dynasties or the CCP. Since the 1990's their conditions have sensibly worsened in terms of religion freedom. While protest have sparked since then, the biggest one happened in 2009. Since then, they saw a gradual rise of restrictions towards them, that sparked in the controversial "Cultural Camps". Many have fled from China, finding refuge most notably in Turkey where a community of 45,000 Uyghur refugees is living.

countries, mainly Japan, US, South Korea, and even the European Union. In the EU case, between 2015 and 2020, more than 25,000 asylum requests were asked and half of them were motivated by religious persecution. But in those numbers, many are constituted by Uyghurs and Tibetan Buddhist, while CAG affiliated asylum seekers are still low in numbers. But the concerning factor about CAG followers is that their number of asylum seeker is rapidly increase. From 42 in 2015 to 1,800 in 2020. And even more distressing is the refusal rate of the refugee status by the arrival countries. In some cases, like Italy and Germany, the rates go from 30% to 15%, while in other such as US, Japan and South Korea, the rate is even 0%. In all of those countries, victim of human right abuse and religiously persecuted people are protected by national and international convention which have ratified. So, to find an explanation plausible enough to this trend becomes difficult. Still, many hypotheses that could help us into reaching a valid conclusion are still available. When analysing this phenomenon, we find that it is a very recent episode of religious persecution, with information that are quite distorted and sometime even old and untrustworthy. Then the few refugee that arrive in host countries, while having difficulties in communication, are treated as if their story was fabricated just to obtain the refugee status in a developed country. In some country cases, like Italy, the motive of such low admittance rate could be answered by analysing the relation between the Vatican and PRC, which concluded an agreement on the Catholic Bishop election in 2018 (then prolonged to 2022). To host such unliked people by the CCP could have retorsions far bigger than what western states could imagine. That is why the lower number of refugees accepted in western countries are found in those that have high trade interests with China. Finally, one of the biggest controversies is about the passport of those asylum seekers. Since we know that a persecuted individual is in most cases deprived of a passport, how come the Chinese government still hasn't requisitioned their passport?

As we can see the problems while dealing with this case of religious persecution are quite numerous, and it is not always possible to make clarity out of the information that we are able to gather. Unfortunately, analysts and scholars have to make progress in this field of study since the number of persecuted Christian and Christian followers are projected to sharply increase by 2025 (with an estimate 170 million Chinese Christians, against the 100 in 2021). To avoid that the persecution of CAG could become an example for the repression of other Christian or any religious group, a collective effort for the tutelage and protection of the right of freedom of speech, association and religion must be respected.

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