

*Catholic Communities and Local Governance in Northeast China**

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Abstract

One feature of Chinese Catholicism, as identified by official Chinese investigation, is that most Chinese Catholics belong to traditional Catholic families and communities, which include generations of believers. This is a relatively stable religious population, whose growth depends largely on the continuity of the family and the community. To explore the origins of this legacy, this article studies the formation and early development of Chinese Catholic communities in Northeast China and their models of religious governance. It argues that the widespread Catholic missions since the 19th century diffused not only religion but also notions of autonomy and models of local governance among Chinese Christians. Based on archival research and fieldwork, the article focuses on two Catholic communities in Northeast China. These two cases demonstrate that the early development of Northeast Catholic communities was largely due to immigration and the absence of the state. The growth of the community coincided with the formation

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of local society. Although the expansion of state power to rural society gradually eroded the traditional nexus of power at the village level, the local religious order in the Catholic communities survived until the mid-20th century. This religious autonomy left a legacy that turned out to be extremely problematic in the post-1949 era. From a historical perspective, this study contributes to our understanding of contemporary outcomes for the Chinese Catholic population and the origins of China's church-state relations at the grassroots level.

Scholars have argued that the state is the most powerful actor in creating and shaping the sociopolitical context for religious growth. This is particularly true for Protestantism, which experienced explosive growth in post-Mao China.¹ By contrast, Catholicism, although it shares many common features with Protestantism, did not experience similar exponential growth.² One explanation attributes this lack of expansion to the historical legacy of Chinese Catholicism and its distinctive characteristics, in particular the fact that the majority of Chinese Catholics are members of traditional Catholic families and communities whose history can be traced back to the 19th century or earlier.³ Compared to the growth of Protestantism that attracted diversified groups in the state modernizing project,⁴ Chinese Catholics are, therefore, a relatively stable religious population whose growth depends largely on the continuity of the family and the community.

Historians ascribe this feature of Chinese Catholicism to the dissemination of Christianity in China by European Catholic missions. The earliest missionary activities in China can be dated to the seventh century, when Nestorian Christians arrived at the western frontier of the Chinese empire. Starting in the mid-Ming dynasty, the missionary movement in Europe brought more Catholic orders to China, including the Franciscans, the Jesuits, and the Dominicans. These early Catholic missionaries made an effort to translate and interpret Catholic doctrines in order to convert Chinese people. By the end of the 18th century, Catholic communities had been established in numerous Chinese provinces.⁵ The process of conversion ignited heated disputes over acculturation, localization, and indigenization that still animate today's Chinese Catholic communities.

The formation of Catholic communities in the Northeast, however, took a different trajectory from that in other parts of China. As the