Catholic Revival During the Reform Era

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on three distinctive features of the revival of Catholicism in China: its relatively slow rate of increase, compared with other forms of Chinese religiosity; its relatively intense internal and external conflicts; and its peculiar mix of antagonism and co-operation with the government. These are explained in terms of three interpenetrating layers of the Chinese Catholic community: its priestly, sacramental religious vision, its social embodiment in rural society, and the legacy of political conflict between the Vatican and the PRC government. Though intimately interconnected, these layers of the Catholic Church have each developed at different paces and in somewhat different directions. The effects of this are seen most clearly in the problems faced by Chinese priests.

The Catholic Church in China is only a "little flock," comprising no more than one per cent of the population. Still, with 10–12 million members, the Church is not small in absolute numbers[1] – there are more Catholics than in Ireland! And probably more active Catholics. Compared with their European and North American counterparts, Chinese Catholics are very devout. Churches and chapels are packed for Sunday Mass, and overflowing on major feast days. Catholics are willing to make serious sacrifices to raise money to build new churches, and impressive numbers of them are willing to risk severe political harassment, even imprisonment, in order to practise their faith. The Catholic Church is a vital presence in China today.[2]

The revitalization of the Catholic Church in China is part of a general revival and growth of religion throughout China. True to its Marxist-Leninist ideology, the PRC did its best to eliminate religion during its first three decades of rule. Although the various constitutions promulgated by the PRC since 1949 have guaranteed freedom of religious belief, they have strictly restricted any public expression of religion. During the Maoist era, the PRC government subjected all citizens to militantly anti-religious propaganda, and, especially during the Cultural Revolution, destroyed places of worship, imprisoned religious leaders and "struggled against" religious believers. Most Western social scientists assumed that most forms of religious practice would have been destroyed by these

1. Jean Charbonnier, *Guide to the Catholic Church in China* (Singapore: China Catholic Communication, 2000), p. 14. Based on research done at the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, this handbook places the number of Catholics at 10 million. These figures, however, are based on research done in 1992. Cf. Anthony Lam, "How many Catholics are there in China?" *Tripod*, No. 71 (September–October, 1992), pp. 51–57. More recently, journalistic reports have been using the figure of 12 million Catholics. Suffice it to say that the number is imprecise.

2. Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 1–20. In this book I list the sources, ethnographic, archival and bibliographical, upon which the above portrait is constructed.

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assaults. Even influential Western religious leaders often assumed this. Catholic missionaries, for example, had often patronizingly thought that many of their Chinese Catholics were poorly educated and weak in the faith – "rice Christians" who could not be expected to survive the harsh persecutions of the Maoist era. But after new opportunities for religious practice opened up under Deng Xiaoping's policies of reform, there has been an astonishing efflorescence of all forms of religious practice.[3] By the government's own (probably underestimated) statistics, there are at least 100 million religious believers in China today, including an officially estimated four million Catholics (with the real figure, as noted above, perhaps being two or three times higher).[4]

Although still not fully explainable by conventional social scientific theories, this general revival can be attributed to factors like the collapse of Marxist ideology, increased social mobility, decreased government capacities for repression, and renewed communication with the outside world. But there are distinctive features of the Catholic revival that must be explained in more specific terms, and this article will concentrate on this level of analysis.

There are three specific features of the Catholic revival on which this article specifically focuses. First, compared with some other religious groups, the growth of the Catholic Church has been relatively static. The increase in the Catholic population – from about 3 million in 1949 to 10–12 million in 2001 – has roughly matched China's general population increase since the establishment of the PRC. Protestants, on the other hand, have expanded much more rapidly, from less than one million to a conservatively estimated 20 million today.[5] Certain "new religions," like the *falun gong*, based on some combination of folk Buddhism and *qigong*, have been born and grown extremely rapidly between the mid-1980s and the end of the 20th century. However, the slower rate of Catholic growth does not seem to be the result of a weakness in religious devotion. At least in terms of willingness to suffer for their faith, Catholics have shown levels of commitment every bit as high as Protestants or *falun gong* members.

A second distinctive characteristic of the Chinese Catholic Church is the relative intensity of its external and internal conflicts. Although there have been many conflicts between Protestants and the government, the conflicts with the Catholics seem to have been more systematic, linking grass-roots conflict with conflict at the national and international levels. As do some Protestant communities, Catholics get involved in confrontations with local authorities and with each other, and sometimes these lead

3. *Ibid.* pp. 25–45.

4. "Xinhua backgrounder views Catholicism in China," Xinhua, 20 August 2000. FBIS-CHI-2000–0820.

5. Alan Hunter and Kim-kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); for a higher estimate, see Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991); for a thorough discussion of the "numbers game," see Daniel H. Bays, "Chinese Protestant Christianity today" in this issue.

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to violence. But unlike Protestants, these local confrontations extend to the national and international levels, in sometimes bitter wars of words between the Vatican and the PRC government. Something like this happens with the government's attacks on both the central leadership and local followers of the *falun gong*. However, unlike the *falun gong*, whose methods of resistance are more passive (being willing to suffer for their convictions and maybe – though this is controversial – even being willing to commit suicide), Catholics sometimes fight back actively. Although Catholic conflicts are not as violent as those of separatist Muslims in the western provinces, they have nevertheless involved more violence than most other religions. The most grisly case of violence thus far was the 1992 murder of a priest who was alleged to be a collaborator with the government, in which the priest was killed by poisoning the wine in his chalice at Mass.[6] A more recent case, also laced with religious symbolism, was the cutting off the ear of a collaborationist priest on Good Friday 2001, presumably in imitation of Saint Peter's cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant who came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemene.[7]

But the relationship between the Catholic Church and Chinese society and government is by no means purely conflictual. A third special characteristic of the Chinese Catholic Church, at least as it has evolved in recent years, is the depth of its political ambivalence – its peculiar and paradoxical mix of antagonism and co-operation with the government.

After presenting a fuller description of these special characteristics in their historical context, this article attempts to explain them in terms of three interpenetrating layers of the Chinese Catholic community: its religious vision, social embodiment and political interests.

Chinese Catholicism in Historical Context

In 1949, there were about three million Catholics in China, the product of three-and-a-half centuries of missionary work, which began with the arrival of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci in Guangzhou in 1583, gained momentum in the 17th century, was interrupted in 1724 by the Yongzheng Emperor's declaration of Catholicism as a "heterodox faith," resumed in the mid-19th century with the support of European imperialists, suffered a setback in the Boxer Rebellion at the end of the century, and then underwent a period of vigorous growth in the first half of the 20th century, despite the obstacles posed by Chinese nationalist movements and by war. Although the early Jesuits were successful in converting Confucian elites in the 17th century and even gained official support from

6. UCAN News, 11 August 1992. As I wrote in *China's Catholics*, p. 156: "The murderer was tried and executed. He may have been deranged, and there is no evidence that his actions were deliberately planned or approved by any Catholic group. But the atmosphere of hostility in the Catholic Church was probably conducive to his crime."

7. UCAN News, 23 April 2001 and 30 May 2001. The priest whose ear was cut off was in Harbin and he was the head of the CPA in the Heilongjiang Diocese. One of the accused perpetrators was another priest, from Qiqihar.

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the Kangxi Emperor, their efforts had been brought to a halt in the early 18th century when their ecclesiastical rivals convinced the Pope that the Jesuits had compromised the faith by adapting it to the rituals and philosophy practised by Chinese elites. Thereafter, the Church focused its efforts mainly on poor and uneducated rural people. Even in the early 20th century, Catholic missionaries thought that the cities were too devoted to "Venus and Mammon" to produce good Catholics.[8]

From the beginnings of the PRC, the clash between Chinese Catholics and the communist government was especially sharp. In 1949, the Vatican, led by the strongly anti-communist Pope Pius XII, forbade Chinese Catholics, under pain of excommunication, to co-operate in any way with the new Chinese regime. For its part, the new regime was determined to bring the Catholic Church, as all other religions, under tight state control. It expelled all missionaries and forbade any dependence on outside support. The regime established political structures to supervise and control the religious community, though of course such structures had existed before in republican and imperial China. The main state agency for this purpose was the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), which in turn was directed by the Communist Party's United Front Department. "Mass associations" were organized to be transmission belts between these agencies and the religious communities. The leaders of these were selected and supervised by the RAB.[9] Although they were not officially state employees, such religious leaders functioned as government cadres. They were paid by the government and their position was primarily dependent on their approval by political superiors rather than by most members of their communities. Although religious leaders could not openly be members of the Communist Party, because one of the requirements of Party membership was atheism, I have been told that some of the heads of these mass associations had secret Party membership. The mass organization to control the Catholic Church was the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA).[10]

Because of the Vatican's strict stance against any co-operation with communism, however, it was particularly difficult to find any Catholic bishops or priests who would accept leadership positions within the CPA. Indeed, one requirement of accepting such a position was to sever one's allegiance to the Vatican, which for Catholics would have been seen as a major betrayal of their identity. (In the case of the Protestants, there were prominent figures like Wu Yaozong [Y.T. Wu], who had been long involved in leftist, nationalist movements and who had some genuine sympathy with the communist cause. There were no such figures among the Catholics.)[11] Catholic leaders, like Archbishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei

8. Madsen, *China's Catholics*, pp. 29–33.

9. In 2000, this bureau got a new name, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA).

10. *Ibid*. pp. 34–39.

11. Gao Wangzhi, "Y. T. Wu: a Christian leader under communism," in Daniel H. Bays, *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 338–352.

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of Shanghai, firmly resisted communist pressure. In the mid to late 1950s the most prominent of such Catholic leaders were sentenced to prison and labour camps. In 1957, the government found five bishops who were willing to assume leadership within the CPA, and, in violation of Church canon law, these bishops consecrated several other bishops without Vatican approval. Most Catholics, both clergy and laity, refused to participate in institutions controlled by these bishops. They carried on their faith in secret, sometimes under threat of severe punishment.[12]

During the Cultural Revolution even the CPA was shut down and priests associated with it imprisoned. All churches were closed and many demolished. All forms of religious practice were condemned as part of the "four olds." The same was true for other religions.

With reform and opening, the government replaced a policy of suppressing religion with one of co-opting and controlling it. For Catholics, that meant that many priests and bishops were released from prison in the late 1970s and early 1980s and allowed to resume their ministries. (But not the most prominent leaders like Gong Pinmei, who languished in prison until 1985, when he was paroled under house arrest on "humanitarian grounds" and then exiled to the United States for medical treatment in 1988.) It also meant the gradual reopening and rebuilding of churches, seminaries and convents. However, the official government policies (set forth in 1982 in Party Central Committee "Document 19") required that all Catholic religious activities be firmly under the supervision of the CPA.[13]

The new regulations made concessions to Catholic concerns about doctrinal and sacramental integrity. Most decisions on theological and liturgical matters were left to the Chinese Catholic Bishops conference, not to the CPA. Catholics were allowed to express their "spiritual allegiance" to the Pope, although they were not supposed to allow the Vatican to interfere in Chinese Church affairs. These conditions were acceptable enough that many Catholics, eager for the spiritual nourishment that they believed could only come through reception of the sacraments, flocked to the officially opened churches. About four million people are now associated with these churches.

But even more Catholics turned to other religious leaders who refused to work within the government's regulations. Perhaps six to eight million Catholics are associated with the so-called "underground church." Its development was facilitated by regulations that the Vatican had secretly directed towards the Chinese Church in 1978. Similar to other directives that the Vatican sent to churches under communist regimes in Eastern Europe, these regulations relaxed the requirements of canon law that bishops follow the Vatican's normal bureaucratic procedures in choosing

12. Madsen, *China's Catholics*, pp. 38–39.

13. *Ibid.* pp. 39–45. For the text of Document 19, see Mickey Spiegel and James Tong (eds.), *Chinese Law and Government*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2000).

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new bishops and training new priests.[14] The purpose was to allow bishops and priests operating clandestinely to run the affairs of the Church even though they could not maintain regular communication with Rome. Many Chinese bishops, operating without the approval of the CPA, went ahead and consecrated new episcopal successors and set up clandestine seminaries to train new priests. Since such clergy were not tainted by association with the CPA, they were seen as more acceptable to many Catholics. Moreover, since there were more Catholics than could be accommodated within the officially opened churches, many other believers who might not have had a principled antipathy toward priests associated with the CPA nevertheless turned to underground priests to fulfil their spiritual needs.[15]

There have thus developed two factions within the Chinese Catholic Church. Even though these are popularly called the "open" and "underground churches," many Chinese Catholics, on both sides, take pains to emphasize that as a matter of theology and even canon law, there is really only one Church, even though there are social and political divisions within it. Some underground Catholics, however, claim that the official church really is a separate church, in a state of schism from the true Church of Rome. They sometimes declare that leaders of the official church have been excommunicated and refuse to receive the sacraments from them.[16] But, for reasons explained below, this is increasingly a minority view, even among the underground, and it is not supported by statements from the Vatican.

The majority of Protestants belong to unregistered "house churches," which, like underground Catholic communities, are vulnerable to government repression. What differentiates the Catholic underground from most of them is its capacity for co-ordinated, nation-wide action. Although there are many unregistered Protestant communities, for example, they do not have a single, unified structure of authority. There is, however, an underground Catholic Bishops Conference, which operates in parallel with the officially sanctioned Bishops Conference. In the autumn of 1989, the inaugural meeting of the underground Bishops Conference, held in Shanxi province, was raided by the police and its leaders were sentenced to prison. This did not crush the underground movement, however, and its leaders manage to continue to issue joint statements, which receive wide circulation throughout China.[17]

In some places, the Catholic underground and open churches have been engaged in passionate, even violent struggle. The killing and mutilation

14. Latin text provided in Kim-kwong Chan, *Towards a Contextual Ecclesiology: The Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China (1979–1983): Its Life and Theological Implications* (Hong Kong: Photech Systems, 1987), pp. 250–53.

15. Madsen, *China's Catholics*, pp. 42–45.

16. *Ibid.* pp. 154–55. Also, Edmond Tang, "The Church into the 1990s," in Edmond Tang and Jean-Paul Wiest (eds.), *The Catholic Church in Modern China* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 32–35. Ma Ji, "My statement," Underground Bishop, "My vision of the Patriotic Association," and Joseph Yao Tianmin, "Who is not loyal to the Church?" all in *ibid.* pp. 120–141.

17. Madsen, *China's Catholics*, p. 43.

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mentioned above were carried out by members of the underground church against priests in the open church. It must be stressed, however, that this violence is not common. Indeed, tensions between underground and official church factions have been diminishing rapidly in recent years. In some places, such as the area in Guangzhou studied by Eriberto Lozada,[18] there is no significant underground church, because believers seem completely satisfied with their officially approved priests. In other places, underground and official priests live together, share church buildings and even participate in religious services together. One important reason for this is that most official bishops – at least two-thirds of them – have quietly received "apostolic mandates," or official approval, from the Vatican.[19] There is no longer a stark division between one faction of the Church loyal to the Vatican and one faction loyal instead to the Chinese government. Still, as indicated by the recent ear-cutting incident, the evolution towards reconciliation is by no means completely smooth.

The remaining tensions are amplified and complicated by their connections to the international arena. Today, all the major Chinese religions are supported and influenced by transnational ties. Protestants, for example, receive large amounts of money and other aid from abroad, a good portion of it illegally smuggled in to nonregistered house churches by evangelical Protestants in North America. The *falun gong* receives instructions from its leader based in New York and financial support, where possible, from devotees around the world. Tibetan Buddhists receive help from the Dalai Lama's world-wide supporters, and Muslims from supporters in the Middle East.

Chinese Catholics also have a wealth of international contacts. Both the open and underground churches receive money not only from Taiwan and Hong Kong, but also from the United States and Europe. In addition, Hong Kong and Taiwan provide educational resources – books and video tapes, and teachers for seminaries and pastoral training workshops. Besides providing formal teachers, who in the nature of the case must go to institutions controlled by the open church, Hong Kong and Taiwan also send many visitors who informally communicate with the underground church about developments in the universal church. Finally, there are about 40 seminarians and priests, from both open and underground churches, receiving advanced training in Europe, and about 20 more in the United States.[20]

The international contacts of Chinese Catholics are brought into a very public focus in negotiations between the Vatican and the PRC government. The Vatican is the only state in Western Europe that maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan. It has demonstrated willingness to shift

18. Eriberto P. Lozada, Jr. *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

19. Jeroom Heyndrickx, "Epiphany 2000: the Beijing–Rome confrontation," *The Tablet*, 13 January 2000.

20. Information from interviews in Hong Kong, November, 1999. As of October 2001, there have been 67 priests, seminarians, nuns and Catholic layworkers who have studied in the US since the late 1980s. There are currently 18 priests and three nuns studying in the US.

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its ties to the PRC in exchange for getting more oversight over the religious life of Chinese Catholics. Negotiations have taken place on several occasions during the 1980s, in the early 1990s and most lately in 1999. They have usually taken place during periods of relative political openness in the PRC, and then broken down during periods of retrenchment. There seems to have been an evolution in the pattern of the negotiations, however. In the earlier years, according to one Vatican diplomat involved in the 1999 negotiations, "we were more eager for normalization than they were, but now they are more eager."[21]

The fundamental obstacle to reaching an agreement has been the selection of bishops. In the latest negotiations, the Vatican has been willing to accept the "Vietnam model," in which it agrees to chose bishops from a list nominated by the government.[22] However, the Vatican demands the final say in selection of bishops – a concession that the Chinese government is so far unwilling to make.

An Explanatory Framework

To understand these patterns of growth, organization, and conflict and co-operation with the government during the era of reform and opening, it is useful to refer to three interpenetrating layers of influence: the Catholic religious vision, its social matrix and its political legacies. Each of these layers has two dimensions, one rooted in Western traditions and the other in Chinese culture and society. Although each layer interacts with the other, they also each develop at their own pace and according to their own logics, creating a very complicated and ambivalent reaction to a modernizing and globalizing Chinese society.

The first and most basic layer is that of religious vision. Catholicism is a priestly, sacramental religion. It sees the Church as the embodiment of God's presence in the world. The Church is thus an institution greater than the sum of its individual members. One's relationship to God is mediated by the sacraments, the fundamental rituals of the Church. The sacraments, in turn, are administered by priests, whose most fundamental authority comes by the grace of God through ordination to priestly status, not through any personal charisma. In the doctrine of the Council of Trent, the sacraments impart grace *ex opere operato*, that is, just by the act of being performed properly, irrespective of the personal holiness of the minister of the sacrament. It is easy for such a doctrine to slip into a kind of magic, in which the rituals are simply instruments to obtain divine favour automatically without the need for any personal moral cultivation by the recipient. It was of course on these grounds that the Protestant

21. Author's interviews in Hong Kong. Unless otherwise noted, these were gathered at a meeting of Catholic Church China experts in November 1999.

22. For discussion of the "Vietnam model," see Eric O. Hanson, *The Catholic Church in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 197–233; and Eric O. Hanson, *Catholic Politics in China and Korea* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), pp. 114–16.

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reformers criticized the Catholic Church, and emphasized instead the prophetic dimensions of the Christian tradition.[23]

Since the late 20th century, especially after the Second Vatican Council of 1963–64, some of the contrasts between Catholicism and Protestantism have been blurred. It is emphasized that the sacraments are not mechanical instruments for obtaining grace but rather powerful symbols that both express and bring into being the faith of the Church. There is a renewed emphasis on how the Catholic Church, even though it incarnates the presence of God, must be continually reformed, because it is a frail human as well as divine institution. There is a new stress on the prophetic aspect of the Church – the divine command to stand apart from the world and to judge critically not just the Church but all human institutions.[24]

But the Catholicism that was brought to China, beginning with the Jesuit missionaries of the late 16th century, was a counter-Reformation version that emphasized the contrasts with Protestantism. Partially because the Chinese Catholic Church was cut off from developments in world Catholicism during the period of ferment aroused by the Second Vatican Council, the Chinese Church embodies the old counter-Reformation vision more fully than any other national Catholic community in the world. The clash between this counter-Reformation Catholicism and a post-Vatican II understanding can be seen in the following comment from a Church worker from Hong Kong who frequently goes to the mainland to give retreats to Chinese priests and nuns: "It is hard to get them to learn to pray, rather than just to say prayers."[25]

The classic priestly, sacramental vision of the Church resonates strongly with important elements within Chinese cultural traditions. The Confucian vision, as Tu Wei-ming describes it, was one of "transcendence in immanence," a vision that stresses the need to seek the *dao* through living within the primary institutions of this world, especially the family and the state.[26] The traditional emphasis on rituals of propriety seems very akin to the sacramental sense. The importance given to respect for hierarchical status corresponds with the Catholic stress on priesthood. Of course there are other strands in the Chinese tradition – indeed the early communist movement drew upon traditions of protest that have a closer affinity with Western Protestantism – but in spirit and practice the Catholic vision seems close to strands that remain influential

23. A succinct formulation of the difference between the Catholic and Protestant vision is in Paul Tillich, "The permanent significance of the Catholic Church for Protestants," *Protestant Digest*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (1941).

24. Compare the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated in 1992 (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1994) with the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, which was the basis for Catholic doctinal education until the 1960s. The new Catechism has been published in Chinese translation. The version openly published in China, however, omits the sentence in Entry 2425 that reads: "The Church has rejected the totalitarianism and atheistic ideologies associated in modern times with 'communism' and 'socialism'." UCAN News, 14 October 1999.

25. Interview in Hong Kong, 1999.

26. Tu Wei-ming, "Confucianism," in Arvind Sharma, *Our Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 202–204.

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among conservative Chinese, including much of today's communist political establishment. It also fits with the fascination for ritual that is often found in rural folk religion.[27] And it is the rural folk culture that disproportionately influences the ethos of the Chinese Church today.

Historically, the Catholic religious vision has become embedded in various forms of social life, which shape and constrain the way the vision can be understood. In Europe Catholicism attained its most elaborate flowering in the agrarian societies of the Middle Ages, and it gave meaning and moral regulation to the primary social relations of peasants and aristocrats. It has had a difficult (but not necessarily unsuccessful) time adapting to the social relations of urban middle classes in modern industrial societies. In China, even more than Europe, it became primarily embedded in the relations of village life, especially after it lost the credibility of scholar officials after the rites controversy. Catholic missionaries made an effort to convert whole villages, or at least whole lineages, in order to provide the social support for perseverance in the faith. Catholics embraced the extended family relationships that were central to village life.[28]

Indeed, in many Catholic villages, especially in those relatively closed to the outside world, a Catholic identity becomes almost identified with such familistic relationships. Some villagers may be "true believers" and others "lax," but even lax Catholics can never completely lose their identity. At the very least, they will have to be buried with Catholic rites, in order to maintain a connection with their ancestors.

Unlike the form which it took in the European Middle Ages, however, Catholicism in China could not easily provide moral links between peasant villagers and political and intellectual elites. After the Pope had rejected the Jesuit accommodation to the Confucian rites, the Church largely abandoned the effort to create an influential Catholic intellectual elite. Without the guidance that might have been provided by such an elite, rural Catholics, despite being warned against the dangers of "paganism," have gradually absorbed beliefs and devotional practices that seem analogous to heterodox folk-Buddhist sects: a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary not unlike the White Lotus Eternal Mother, an emphasis on miraculous salvation rather than ethical cultivation, a belief in miraculous healing and exorcism – and a rejection of the rationalistic scholarship that legitimated the status of imperial officials. Many of these features are still visible in many rural Catholic villages today, and they create a gulf between such villages and relatively well-educated Catholics in the cities.[29] Present-day Chinese Catholics are often reporting apparitions of

27. Richard Madsen, "Beyond orthodoxy: Catholicism as Chinese folk religion," in Stephan Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu, *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

28. Madsen, *China's Catholics*, pp. 50–53. For excellent ethnography of Catholic villages, see Wu Fei, "Maimangshangde shengyan: yige xiangcun tianzhujiaohui zhongde xinyang han shenghuo" ("Maimang's Holy Word: belief and life in a village Catholic church"), Beijing University MA thesis, 1999, and Lozada, *God Aboveground*.

29. Richard Madsen, "Beyond orthodoxy."

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the Virgin Mary. Using rituals of dubious orthodoxy, rural priests cast out demons and perform miraculous healings.[30] Meanwhile, many urbanized Catholics drift away from the faith because it does not seem relevant to their modern experience. "I had no fear for our Catholics facing the challenge of persecution," says Bishop Jin Luxian, the bishop of Shanghai. "But, now, facing the challenge of modernization … I have fears."[31]

A final layer of influence on the shape of Catholicism has been political: the relationship of the Church to political patrons and opponents. In the 19th century, Catholicism was often implicated with right-wing politics in Europe and with imperialism in China. These relationships continued until well into the 20th century. Even after the Catholic Church disavowed the imperialistic enterprise, it has often continued its association with the political right. Particularly in China (where the Church was cut off from currents of "liberation theology" that developed in Latin America and the Philippines after the 1960s), the Church has remained strongly associated with the anti-communist cause. Even though most Chinese Catholics wisely try to stay out of politics, there were some who hoped that the Church in China could help to accomplish what Church-inspired organizations like Solidarity in Poland accomplished, the destruction of communist regimes. This is undoubtedly part of the reason why right-wing Catholics in the United States, like Phyllis Schlafly and Robert Dornan, participate in organizations supporting the Chinese underground Church.[32]

Priesthood and the Growth of the Catholic Community

These religious, social and political influences affect many aspects of the Chinese Church. But their most crucial effects are upon the role of Chinese priests, and it is here that this analysis is focused.

Ritual status. Because of its sacramental vision, a properly ordained priesthood is essential to the Church. Catholics believe that they need the sacraments to receive God's grace, and the efficacy of the sacraments depends upon their being administered by a priest who has been validly ordained. Personal piety, no matter how deep and how sincere, cannot fully substitute for receipt of the sacraments. Unordained laypeople, no matter how holy, cannot substitute for a priest. Reverence for the priesthood gives Catholic communities a stable focal point and a sense of connection with a universal Church, which has helped sustain the Church in all its difficulties. However, dependence on priests makes it more

30. Fuller discussion of such apparitions and miracles can be found in Madsen, *China's Catholics*, pp. 91–95.

31. Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian, "How the 'little flock' in China lives the gospel in the changing society of today," speech at a conference in Manila, 1994; xeroxed English text furnished by the Holy Spirit Study Centre, Hong Kong.

32. They are on the Board of Free the Fathers, which in turn in connected with organizations such as Freedom House, which urge the US government to take strong action in defence of religious freedom, especially for Christians, around the world.

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difficult for Catholic communities to expand rapidly than for Protestants, who rely mostly on easily trained, often highly entrepreneurial lay preachers, female as well as male.

One of the agonies inflicted by the Maoist regime on Chinese Catholics was its denial of priests to them. While most of the clergy was jailed, Catholics carried on their faith through private devotions, but no matter how pious they were, they felt a pressing need for the sacraments and feared for the salvation of their souls if they were denied the services of priests to hear their confessions, give them Holy Communion, bless their marriages and administer the Last Rites. After the Maoist era, the government returned some of their priests to them – but not enough to meet the religious demand. Most of the priests were now old and frequently in poor health. Some of them had been compromised, in the eyes of many Catholics, because of their association with the Catholic Patriotic Association.

The supply of clergy has been improving, but there remain social and political obstacles to the recruitment of new priests and the appointment of new bishops. As of 1999, the average age of bishops in the open church was about 78. The demographic situation of priests is better. By the year 2000, about three-quarters of China's estimated 2,200 priests had been ordained during the past 12 years. In the 1980s, the government began to reopen seminaries, and there are presently about 1,000 seminarians in 19 approved major seminaries and five preparatory seminaries. In addition there are perhaps 700 in underground seminaries.[33]

Catholics must often rely on the underground church to fill gaps in the supply of priests. Disputes about the relative quality of underground and open church priests help create the strong factionalism that one finds in the Chinese Church. At the same time, common agreement on the importance of the priesthood helps bind the factions into a unity. While opposing Protestant communities can separate themselves from one another, opposing Catholic factions cannot. They are like rival factions within a traditional Chinese family, whose members stay together even when they are causing each other considerable pain.

Disputes among different Catholic factions over the priesthood centre not on the validity but on the licitness of one another's sacramental practices. In traditional Catholic theology, the administration of a sacrament may be "valid but illicit." That is, as long as it has been performed in the prescribed way by a priest who has been ordained in a properly performed ritual, it "works." But if it is performed in circumstances forbidden by canon law, for instance by a priest who does not have ecclesiastical permission to be functioning as a priest, the priest who performs it and the person who receives it commit a sin.

A priest is functioning licitly if he has been properly ordained by a bishop who is himself acting licitly and if the priest is working with the approval of the rightful bishop of his diocese. Church law says that to be licitly made a bishop, a priest must receive approval from the Vatican.

33. Charbonnier, *Guide*, pp. 14–15.

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The official position of the CPA is that China's bishops do not need such permission. Nevertheless, about two-thirds of open church bishops have informally received Vatican approval. When they get consecrated as new bishops, they often go through elaborate manoeuvres to ensure that at least one and if possible all of the three bishops required for the ceremony have received Vatican approval. Priests too go through similar manoeuvres to ensure that their ordinations are licit. Even if they are planning to work within the open church, young men awaiting ordination often go to great lengths – even if this means postponing their ordination – to ensure that it will be done at the hands of a Vatican-approved bishop.[34] Meanwhile, the CPA tries to assert the principle that it should decide who gets consecrated a bishop or ordained a priest. The underground church has the advantage that all its priests and bishops are considered licitly ordained.

Claiming that priests in the open church are acting without permission from the Vatican, some underground priests warn Catholics that they are committing a mortal sin by receiving the sacraments in the open church. But even Church law says that it is permitted to receive the sacraments from any validly ordained priest under extraordinary circumstances, for instance if no other priest is available when one is in imminent danger of death.[35] The circumstances of the Church in China are extraordinary under any measure, but ambiguous enough that Catholics often feel that they have to make complicated decisions about how they receive the sacraments. Sometimes, they might attend Mass celebrated by a priest in an "open church," but they might not go to confession to such a priest, because they fear that he might come under pressure to report their sins to political authorities.[36] And when they were dying, if at all possible, they might want an underground priest to give them the Last Rites because they absolutely cannot afford to take chances that they might be illicitly receiving the sacrament.[37]

Social roles. The priest's role as a ritual leader is connected to his role as a community leader. Since the Chinese Church is so embedded in rural society, its priests take on many of the characteristics of local authorities. The intense concern over the ecclesiastical "lineage" of its bishops and priests, rather than, say, their preaching ability or their personalities, resonates with traditional emphases on particularistic, patron–client relationships. The effect of this is to encase Chinese bishops, priests and lay people within complicated informal, vertically organized networks. Because of factional divisions, sometimes within a locality there are at least two networks of loyalties running parallel to one another. One

34. Information based on author's interviews in Hong Kong.
35. Tang, "The Church into the 1990s."
36. *Ibid.*
37. During my ethnographic fieldwork near Tianjin in 1993, in a community where most members worshipped in an open church, there was a sudden flurry of whisperings that an underground priest had just slipped in and out of the village to give the Last Rites to someone who was dying. I never got to meet the priest personally, however.

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extends towards the offices of the CPA, another, for most Catholics thicker and more morally compelling, extends towards the Vatican. But there are gaps in the networks. A network to the Vatican does not necessarily connect in an unbroken chain all the way to Rome. Contact with Vatican representatives is intermittent at best and accurate information about who stands where is hard to come by. Rivalries even between bishops and priests who are nominally approved by Rome can test the loyalty of Catholics lower down their networks.

Especially in the rural context, the overwhelming importance for Catholics of having a validly and licitly ordained priesthood creates a fluid but viscous pattern of Catholic community life. It is fluid because under current political circumstances Catholics must fulfil their need for priests by relying on informal networks rather than the regular bureaucratic procedures that both the Vatican and the PRC would for different reasons and incompatible purposes prefer. It is viscous because the need for a priesthood slows down processes of Church development.

But the embeddedness of the Church in rural life makes it difficult to get the kinds of priests it needs – effective local pastors who could link local piety with a theology fit for coping with the problems of modernization. Most recruits to the seminaries, both open and underground, in fact come from the countryside, often produced by large families in remote villages. Few modern urban youths seem attracted to the clerical life.[38] Part of the attraction of the priestly vocation to rural young men is the great status attributed to it by their families. But priests today – at least in the official Church – are trained in seminaries in the cities and receive enough of a modern education to alienate them from the customs of their home communities. They often develop aspirations for something other than a rural ministry. If they are sent to work in the countryside, they sometimes feel embarrassed at being put on a pedestal by Catholics in the villages and feel inadequate to live up to their expectations. Although they have enough education to alienate them from village customs, they do not have enough to deal with the social, political and cultural challenges of such an environment. The consequences of this are described in an article by a Beijing Catholic layman published in the Hong Kong Catholic journal *Tripod*:

> The average young priest on the mainland is ordained after five or six years of post-secondary education. His educational environment in the seminary has been intense, enclosed and isolated from the outside…. After ordination, he finds himself in a different kind of world. He is thrust into an active ministry full of conflicts and difficulties, in which temptations are many and supports are few. Problems soon begin to surface: personal, social and ecclesiastical. He often finds himself overworked, undervalued and lonely. For the strong, these are challenges to be met and overcome, merely steps along the way to progress…. But for those who come to their day of ordination still hampered by unresolved ambivalence, for those who choose to

38. For instance, at the seminary at Sheshan, close to Shanghai, one of the best seminaries in China that draws its students from across the nation, most seminarians in the 1980s came from Shanghai itself. Now, very few come from there. Almost all come from rural areas.

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become priests more out of internal or external pressures than personal conviction, these problems are much more acute. Such young priests have the feeling that they are riding on the back of a tiger with no possibility of escape. As the years pass, their interest in pastoral work declines, and they turn to more material pleasures for solace. They cultivate a taste for "the good life." … Soon they seek to fill a void in their lives with wining, dining, and the aimless pursuit of pleasures.[39]

Catholic theology itself does not give these young priests a clear model for how they should play out their role of a sacramental leader at the local level. In the absence of such a model, the role of the priest gets imagined in terms of the role of the village cadre. The pressures of modernization then help to produce tensions and even introduce kinds of corruption that one commonly finds among rural officials.

The processes of modernization also foster a generation gap among young priests:

Older priests have seniority and experience, but they appear to the younger priests as passive, sedate and conservative, anxious to avoid any disturbance or controversy. On their part, the older priests find it difficult to accept the new ideas of the young, and they tend to respond to them in a pedantic and patronizing way…. There are some bishops and leaders of the older clergy who have little respect for nor understanding of the younger priests. They stereotype them and demand total compliance with their own wishes. They are particularly distrustful of the brighter, more active ones, on whom they place enough restrictions to ensure that they do not act contrary to or independent of their own authority.[40]

Even in the tightly disciplined world of the seminaries, would-be priests get new ideas that they ought to have more autonomy, that faith must be more a matter of active, internal conviction than external obedience. The gap between their views and that of the older generation is intensified by the absence of a middle generation.

Political conflicts. Priests are also torn by political pressures coming from two directions: from the government and from the Vatican.

Catholics widely assume that government agents have infiltrated both the official and underground churches and, among other things, try to keep the Church off balance by fomenting discord. The aggressive attempts by the government to control the Church are not simply a result of standard government strategies to stifle all forms of independent association, no matter how innocuous. They are also the legacy of a long history of direct political conflict between the Catholic Church and the communist government. Especially after the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989, the government has been utterly determined to stamp out any Catholic-inspired political activism – which, according to their standard operating procedures, means erring on the side of political security and repressing many forms of religious activity that would probably be considered a-political in a Western context.

39. Yu Min, "The Church in China: on-going concerns and challenges," trans. by Norman Walling, SJ, *Tripod*, Vol. 20, No. 117 (May-June 2000), pp. 27–28.
40. *Ibid*. pp. 31–32.

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Standard forms of political repression do not seem to be working well, however. During the 1990s, the government subjected the underground church to waves of violence, including imprisonment, beatings and demolition of church buildings. This has not reduced the numbers of practising Catholics, and, by producing martyrs, may have increased the zeal of some Catholic activists and perhaps only increased their politicization. At the same time, the government has been powerless to prevent an evolution towards reconciliation among Catholics in the open and underground churches. The number of bishops in the open churches who have gained Vatican approval has been rapidly climbing, from perhaps 30 per cent in the early 1990s to over two-thirds today. There is now no clear distinction between an open church which the government controls politically and an underground church which it does not.

As I have argued elsewhere, it is perhaps best now to make a distinction between an official (*guanfang*) and unofficial (*wuguanfang*) church than between an official and underground church:

> As used in modern Chinese parlance, "official" refers to the realm of activity that is publicly recognized and controlled by the state. "Unofficial" refers to a realm of private negotiations at least partly independent of state control. In ordinary Chinese speech, "unofficial" has a connotation of "unorthodox" or "deviant," reflecting a political system that denies the legitimacy of any forms of association not under state supervision. But "official" and "unofficial" are not neatly separated. They form a continuum. Most people have to live and work under the supervision of state-controlled organizations, but within those organizations (sometimes in complicity with the organization's leaders) they carry out a great deal of unofficial activity, which sometimes contradicts and subverts the stated purposes of the organization.
>
> Thus, to regulate and supervise Roman Catholics, there are official government regulations for religious activity and officially recognized organizations, like the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference. But within this framework, Catholics are developing their own informal rules and unwritten procedures for establishing legitimate authority. As in much of the rest of China, this vigorously developing unofficial sector does not overtly defy government authorities but it subtly neutralizes them, and renders them increasingly irrelevant.
>
> In the unofficial Church, people, ideas, and moral rules from the open and underground churches become blended together in new syntheses. And no matter what government officials or leaders of the Catholic Patriotic Association might desire, the religious life of unofficial Church is oriented toward communion with the universal Church, under the jurisdiction of the Pope.[41]

This leads to a certain convergence of interests between Beijing and the Vatican. Beijing has been trying to impose a rationalized system of bureaucratic control upon the Church, but is frustrated by the growth of an informal, unofficial organization of Church life. However the Vatican, too, would like to impose a more rationalized system of control upon this luxuriant informal undergrowth.

It was perhaps for this reason that the PRC government seemed

41. Richard Madsen, "Saints and the state: religious evolution and problems of governance in China," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2001), pp. 187–211.

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increasingly willing in early 1999 to open negotiations with the Vatican on normalization of diplomatic relations. Normalization would enable the Vatican, through its papal nuncio, to impose a more effective bureaucratic discipline upon its bishops and priests. If the PRC could then convince the Vatican to ensure that its priests would not become politically active or socially disruptive, the PRC regime could get the kind of social stability that is in its interests.

The Vatican, on the other hand, had some reasons to be accommodating towards Beijing. The old battle between Catholicism and communism was mostly over. Chinese communism was ideologically dead. One of the Vatican's main concerns with the Chinese government was with its lawlessness and corruption. In spite of some continued repression, Catholics have been gaining a good deal of practical freedom to practise their religion, but this is not protected under the law. It is often gained through unofficial understandings with local officials, sometimes lubricated with bribes. Under these circumstances, Catholics are vulnerable to extortion. For example, when a diocese in Sichuan wanted to build a convent they had to pay inflated prices to a government-controlled construction company. Then officials from the CPA appropriated the buildings and rented them out for profit.[42]

The ambient corruption can seep into the Church. Along with other outsiders interested in providing financial aid to Chinese Catholics, Vatican officials have become concerned about a lack of accountability. Because there are no regular channels of communication with Catholics in China, especially with the non-official church, it is difficult for outsiders to evaluate requests for financial aid and determine if donations are properly spent.[43]

Regular channels of communication could also help the Vatican better evaluate the suitability of its bishops and priests, and to develop more systematic procedures for training and supervising them. In short, it could impose a bureaucratic rationalization on the priesthood. Such rationalization might not be entirely welcome among clergy and laity at the grass roots. In fact, as the negotiations for Sino-Vatican normalization were moving ahead in the autumn of 1999, underground bishops moved to consecrate a number of younger bishops (without having to go through the careful process of vetting that the Vatican would have been able to institute after normalization), thereby presenting both the CPA and the Vatican with fait accompli.[44]

A more rationalized hierarchy could be welcome to the government only if it had more say than the Vatican on the selection of bishops. The government insisted even more strongly on this point, especially by the autumn of 1999, as it used its campaign against the *falun gong* to tighten control over all forms of religious activity. The Vatican in the end could

42. Author's interviews in Hong Kong.
43. Author's interviews in Hong Kong.
44. Author's interviews in Hong Kong.

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not yield the principle that it must have the final word on the selection of bishops. Thus, the 1999 round of Sino-Vatican negotiations collapsed.

The wary co-operation then turned into harsh conflict. On 6 January 2000, the Feast of the Epiphany, the CPA staged a consecration of five new bishops, none of them approved by the Vatican. Unlike other such rituals in recent years, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Beijing was almost empty. Police ringed the Cathedral, and those in attendance were mostly government cadres rather than practising Catholics. Even Catholics closely associated with the open church refused to attend. Buses sent to fetch 120 seminarians from the National Seminary in Beijing, an institution closely sponsored by the open church, returned empty. (The seminarians and their rector were later punished for this.)[45] The Vatican pointedly reminded Chinese Catholics that bishops who accepted consecration without an "apostolic mandate" were automatically excommunicated.[46]

In a document issued in the autumn of 1999, the Party centre had outlined a strategy for "winning over the majority" of Catholics and "isolating a minority."[47] It had now lost its hope of winning over the majority. By the spring of 2000, the government began to backtrack. In May, it allowed the consecration of a bishop who had very openly received approval from the Vatican. (A large, enthusiastic congregation attended the ceremony.) But then on 1 October the Vatican went ahead with plans to canonize 120 Chinese martyrs, most of whom had died in the 19th century, especially during the Boxer uprising. *Renmin ribao* denounced this for "hurting the feelings of the Chinese people," and it said that the so-called saints had "violated Chinese laws …, playing accomplices to the imperialist and colonialist invasion of China, committing unpardonable crimes, and deserving the punishments they received."[48]

The leaders of the CPA dutifully echoed this, even repeating parts of the official government line verbatim, and organized meetings for clergy in the open church to add their voices of denunciation.[49] But many other clergy and laity were quietly joyful that the Church had for the first time proclaimed as saints Catholics nurtured on their own soil. At the officially organized meetings, some priests even stood up to defy the government line and to praise the newly canonized saints.[50]

In the political battle between Beijing and the Holy See the Vatican is clearly winning, because it commands the strong allegiance of the vast majority of China's Catholics. But why does there have to be a political

45. UCAN News, 4,6,7 January 2000; Fides News Service, 14 January.

46. UCAN News, 26 June 2000.

47. Document 26 "Regarding the strengthening of Catholic Church work in the new circumstances," supposedly issued by the Secretariat of Party Central on 17 August 1999. Translated in *Tripod*, Vol. 20, No. 116, pp. 32–36.

48. Editorial and article by Shi Yan, "The true colors of the 'saints'," *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 3 October 2000. Translated by FBIS, 2 October 2000.

49. "Foreign ministry statement against 'canonization' hailed," Xinhua, 2 September 2000. Translated in FBIS-CHI-2000–1002.

50. UCAN News, 17 September 2000.

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battle? In present-day circumstances, it would seem to be in the interests of neither party to be in a political battle. The Vatican has no need – if it ever did – to combat a moribund communist ideology. The PRC cannot have any significant control over the behaviour of Catholics unless it has co-operative relations with the Vatican. For the reasons adduced above, however, the Church cannot fully escape its political legacy, even if Vatican diplomats wanted to. That legacy is embedded within the collective memory of many Catholics, especially older ones, and it deeply influences their religious and moral self-understandings. This is to no small degree the fault of a Chinese system which, especially during the Maoist era, forced people to politicize all spheres of their lives. Meanwhile, the PRC government is too insecure about its grip on the country to give the Catholic Church even a modest level of autonomy, even if doing so might work to the PRC's long-term best interests.

Conclusion

Though intimately interconnected, the various layers of the Catholic Church have each developed at different paces and in somewhat different directions. Influenced belatedly by the Second Vatican Council, the layer of sacramental, priestly vision has been moving away from an understanding of the sacraments as a means for gaining grace to an understanding of them as powerful symbols of faith. However, the process is slowed, not simply because of the difficulty of learning the lessons of Vatican II, but because of the resonance of the older vision with the lifestyles of the peasants who are the backbone of the Chinese Church.

The rural communities in which the church is embedded are changing at a different pace from changes in Catholic theology. The heartland of the faith is in small rural villages, which for several generations were largely cut off from urban life and even now are more cut off than most villages. The social practices of such villages remain extremely conservative, centred on loyalty to extended family and obedience to the authority of patriarchs and priests. Catholic rituals are seen as sanctifying and strengthening such practices. The closedness of such villages during the Maoist era only deepened the identification of village life with Catholic practice. Under the new socialist market economy, such villages are becoming more open now. As young people migrate outside of the villages and begin to get some distance on relations to family and kin, they begin to re-evaluate their faith – and often to lose it. Seminarians and young priests who get their training in the cities develop a more modern understanding of the faith, but sometimes this alienates them from the Catholic communities in which they grew up and to which they may eventually be sent to serve. Paradoxically, confusion over how to carry out the religious demands of the priesthood leaves young priests with the temptation to model themselves more after rural cadres than after modern religious pastors.

Although the political orientations of Chinese Catholicism are certainly shaped by its religious vision and its social matrix, they develop at their

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own pace, influenced both by historical inertia and by international forces that are outside the control of the Chinese Church. Historically, relations between the PRC and the Catholic Church have been more deeply politicized than relations between the government and any other world religion, except for Tibetan Buddhism. Because of the ways in which both the Vatican and the PRC government would like to impose more bureaucratic control over the Church, Rome and Beijing are engaged in a complex game of co-operation and conflict that is evolving in uncertain directions. This will affect the ability of the Chinese Catholic Church to renew its theology, recruit and train adequate clergy, and adapt its pastoral practices to an urbanizing, market-driven society.

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