The China Quarterly (2025), **261**, 162–182
doi:10.1017/S030574102400078X

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(En)countering State-led Sinicization: Critical Discursive Responses from Roman Catholics in China

Chit Wai John Mok

Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China
Email: chit-wai-john.mok@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract

In 2015, President Xi Jinping proclaimed the principle of the Sinicization of religions. Since then, it has become the Communist Party's guiding thought in religious governance. However, so far little is known about how it is perceived by everyday religious practitioners, especially Christians. Based on textual analysis of speeches and writings by leaders of the Catholic Church in China, and 50 in-depth interviews with Catholic practitioners from the mainland and Hong Kong, this paper examines how Catholics (en)counter the public transcript created by the state. Church leaders at the national level publicly embrace Sinicization and appropriate the Church's teaching on inculturation, another transcript, as its justification. However, the everyday practitioners interviewed for this study refused to embrace this discourse. Instead, they adopted one of three discursive strategies: rejection, evasion and empathy. All fell short of endorsing the state's discourse. The findings suggest that the Church's transcript enables Catholic practitioners to critically (en)counter the state's transcript.

摘要

二〇一五年，习近平主席提出「宗教中国化」的话语（discourse）。由那时起，中国化成为共产党管治宗教的指导思想。然而到目前为止，对于一般教徒（特别是基督徒）如何理解中国化，我们所知甚少。本文根據两项研究方法和相关资料，探讨在中国的天主教徒如何应对国家所建立的公开文本（public transcript）：对教会领袖的演说及文章进行文本分析，以及深度访问五十名來自中国大陆或香港的天主教徒。全国层面的教会领袖公开地接纳中国化，并挪用另一文本——教会有关本地化（inculturation）的教导——作为理据。另一边厢，本研究的普通信徒受访者拒绝接纳中国化。他们采取三种话语上的策略（discursive strategies）去应对，包括：抵制（rejection）、回避（evasion），和理解（empathy）。三种策略均未有支持国家的话语。研究结果显示，教会的文本使天主教徒能够应对国家的文本。

Keywords: Sinicization; religious governance; religious policy; religious question; Catholic Church; inculturation; public transcript

关键词: 中国化; 宗教管治; 宗教政策; 宗教问题; 天主教会; 本地化; 公开文本

Students exploring contemporary Chinese politics are no strangers to political slogans espousing state ideologies. In the religious realm, the most frequently promoted slogan since the "reform and opening-up" has been "love the country, love the religion" (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教). It can be found in probably all public speeches made by officially sanctioned religious leaders. During the Central United Front Work Conference in 2015, President Xi Jinping 习近平 asserted that religions must follow the path of Sinicization (*Zhongguohua* 中国化). The following year, the idea was reinforced by Xi at the National Religious Work Conference. In recent developments, Sinicization has arguably overtaken "love the country, love the religion" to become the guiding principle in religious governance.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of SOAS University of London. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

To ensure consistency and obedience, the Party is forceful in reiterating the official interpretation of its slogans. Yet, how the official interpretation is being received by Chinese citizens requires investigation. Despite a growing literature on the Sinicization of religions in China under President Xi,[1] there is a lack of empirical data examining how everyday practitioners on the ground encounter and respond to the state's campaign. One reason for this scarcity is the increasing difficulty of conducting fieldwork that investigates politically sensitive topics in China.[2] This paper attempts to partially fill that gap.

The Sinicization of religion represents an important case of a propagandized narrative deployed by the Chinese state to govern and control religious communities. When practitioners respond to the state ideology, they are evaluating the state's "public transcript," a cultural construct maintained by the state to naturalize power, which may not necessarily be compatible with their religious beliefs.[3] They may reject this public transcript completely or combine the transcript with their beliefs. They may also embrace it and in return reject their own beliefs. Based on 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Roman Catholics from mainland China and Hong Kong,[4] as well as textual analysis of the Catholic Church's documents, this paper argues that while national leaders of the Catholic Church in mainland China publicly embrace the state ideology and appropriate Catholic teaching on inculturation (or localization, *bendihua* 本地化) as another public transcript to support their reasoning, everyday Catholics including clerics, religious brothers and sisters, and lay people largely refuse to endorse the state's discourse. The interviewees (en)countered Sinicization with three discursive strategies, namely rejection, evasion and empathy. The majority rejected Sinicization as the Party's attempt to control the Catholic Church and distinguished it from inculturation. They all reflexively and critically (en)countered the state-imposed ideology by deploying the Church's transcript. The Church's centripetal and hierarchical structure,[5] which is inherently incompatible with the Party's transcript that aims at homogenizing religious practices, is arguably an essential factor leading ordinary Catholics to overwhelmingly question the state's discourse.

In the next two sections of this paper, I briefly describe the Party's religious policy and the situation of the Catholic Church in contemporary China. Then I explain the meaning of Sinicization according to the Party and introduce the Catholic teaching on inculturation. In the two sections following that, I elaborate on the theoretical framework, which is based on the concept of public transcript, as well as the methodology. I then move on to examine how Catholics in China respond to the state's ideology. The responses are grouped into two categories: (1) the public responses of the national leaders of the Catholic Church, and (2) the responses of the interviewees as everyday practitioners. Finally, based on the data, I discuss the findings and their implications. This paper heeds the call for extending the investigation of Sinicization to Christian groups,[6] and offers a substantive account of how Sinicization is being (en)countered by everyday religious practitioners.

The Religious Policy of the PRC

Ever since its establishment in 1949, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has tried to manage the "religious question" with varying degrees of cooptation, containment and,

1 See, e.g., Jin and Koesel 2024; Madsen 2021a; Zimmer 2022.

2 Madsen 2021b.

3 Scott 1990; Distelhorst and Fu 2019.

4 Hong Kong and mainland Catholics have very different religious experiences in general. However, since the implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong in 2020, the city has been dramatically "mainlandized." The choice of interviewees will be explained in detail in the methodology section.

5 The ecclesial hierarchy in China forms part of the Latin Church and follows the Roman Rite (Yang, Felipe 2024). It recognizes that "the Roman Pontiff not only possesses power over the universal Church but also obtains the primacy of ordinary power over all particular churches and groups of them" (Code of Canon Law, Can. 333 Sec. 1).

6 Vermander 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

sometimes, adaptation.[7] In the early years, the Party cautiously explored the possibility of forging working relations with various religious groups, and employed a strategy of cooptation.[8] Then, in 1966, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 launched the Cultural Revolution, which aimed to eradicate everything deemed to be "feudal," including religions. However, despite severe persecution, religions survived.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 launched the "reform and opening-up" policy. Religious groups capitalized on the relatively relaxed environment and underwent a revival. The Party, however, also resumed its control of religious activities. In 1982, Beijing published "The basic viewpoint and policy on religious affairs during the socialist period of our country," commonly known as Document No. 19. Through this foundational document, the Party announced its toleration of religions, recognizing the "religious freedom" of people who practised "normal religions," as defined by the Party.[9] Religious bodies were to be united under the United Front, and they must contribute to the national project of modernization, unification and anti-hegemony.[10]

Several other documents were published to further concretize the Party's approach to religions, and new regulations were enacted to control practices. From the 1980s to 2010s, the official discourse and major policies of the Party on religions remained largely consistent. First, religions were tolerated, but they must also contribute to national goals. Second, religious activities were only allowed at locations authorized by the government. Missionary work or proselytizing was forbidden. Third, while religions could serve as bridges to connect China with international friends, linkages with specific entities, be they governmental or non-governmental, were forbidden. For example, forging relations with foreign missionary bodies was taboo.[11] Catholics faced a particular dilemma because of the Church's inseverable, though adaptable, connection to the Holy See.

In general, religious groups were allowed to develop. Where religious landscapes offered an opportunity to attract investment for economic development, local officials were willing to collaborate with religious leaders.[12] However, the rapid expansion of religions worried some Party leaders. Tighter controls and new regulations demanding strict registration requirements for religious bodies were introduced under the administration of President Jiang Zemin 江泽民.[13] Jiang asserted that religions needed to be guided to become compatible with socialism. Later, under President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, these controls were partially relaxed.[14]

Since taking office in 2013, President Xi has launched several campaigns to tackle issues facing the Party and the country, such as corruption and the slowing down of the country's economy. Practically, he has further concentrated power in his hands by forming a core ruling faction. He has also promoted his vision of the "Chinese Dream" as a ruling discourse.[15] Once again, ideological struggle has returned as the Party's guiding approach in religious governance. There are three key narratives to this approach. First, as China faces an increasingly hostile West, the struggle against ideological infiltration is of utmost importance for national security, and religion is one of the major concerns.[16] Second, religious affairs are to be handled in accordance with the law, under a "rule by law" principle. Third, and most importantly, the Party must remain at the apex

7 Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Yang, Fenggang 2011.
8 Lam 1994; Yang, Fenggang 2011.
9 "Guanyu woguo shehuizhuyi shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce" (The basic viewpoint and policy on the religious question during our country's socialist period). *Zhongguo minzu zongjiao wang*, 31 March 1982, http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/folder/290171.htm. Accessed 16 November 2023.
10 Goossaert and Palmer 2011.
11 Yang, Fenggang 2011.
12 Koesel 2014.
13 Leung 2005.
14 Cao 2010.
15 Choi, Givens and MacDonald 2021; Economy 2018; Kou 2017.
16 Liu and Zhao 2014; "Xi Jinping: yishi xingtai gongzuo shi dang de yixiang jiduan zhongyao de gongzuo" (Xi Jinping: work on ideology is an extremely important work of the Party). *Xinhua News Agency*, 20 August 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2013-08/20/c_117021464.htm. Accessed 16 November 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the ruling structure: the Party must "tightly control the dominance of religious work."[17] Religious leaders are required to be "politically reliable" and to toe the Party's line during "critical moments."[18] It is under Xi's new ruling policy that the Sinicization of religion has become a guiding principle.[19]

The Catholic Church in the PRC

The relationship between the Party and the Catholic Church has always been an uneasy one. The Church has been accused (with some justification) of colluding with imperial and colonial forces. In addition, the Party is suspicious of its supposed foreign origins and connection with a foreign sovereign, the Holy See. The relationship was further strained in the 1950s when a group of local Catholic practitioners stood with the Party and advocated the "three-self" principles of the Church: self-administration (*zizhi* 自治), self-support (*ziyang* 自养) and self-propagation (*zichuan* 自传).

In 1957, under the leadership of the Party, a group of priests and laypeople established the Catholic Laity Patriotic Association of China (*Zhongguo Tianzhujiaoyou aiguo hui* 中国天主教友爱国会), which adhered to the principles of "independence and self-administration" (*duliziban* 独立自办). The Association was renamed the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (*Zhongguo Tianzhujiao aiguo hui* 中国天主教爱国会, Patriotic Association hereafter) in 1962. The PRC also attempted the first round of "self-election and self-consecration" (*zixuan zisheng* 自选自圣) of Chinese bishops, that is, electing and consecrating bishops without papal approval. Pope Pius XII condemned the "three-self" principles as "cunning,"[20] and the self-election of bishops as "against the discipline and unity of the Church."[21] During the Cultural Revolution, even churches previously sanctioned by the state were forced to shut.

The Catholic Church, along with other religions, enjoyed a revival in the 1980s when spaces were opened up. However, the Party also re-asserted its control over Chinese Catholics. The Patriotic Association was re-established, and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (*Zhongguo Tianzhujiao jiaotuan* 中国天主教主教团), which was not recognized by the Holy See, was formed. Together, these associations formed the apex of the state-sanctioned Catholic Church and were known as "One association and one conference" (*yihuiyituan* 一会一团). Moreover, the "self-election and self-consecration" of bishops also resumed. As a result, Chinese Catholics were split between open and underground communities. The open community was led by bishops recognized by the state but not necessarily by the Holy See; the underground community was led by bishops approved by the pope but not by the Chinese government, or led by clerics who refused to register with local authorities. As of today, this division remains in certain locales, and conflicts can sometimes lead to dire consequences.[22]

17 "Xi Jinping chuxi quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao jianghua" (Xi Jinping attends the national conference on religious work and gives speech). *Xinhua News Agency*, 23 April 2016, http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2016/0423/c1001-28299513.html. Accessed 16 November 2023; "Xi Jinping zai quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao jianchi woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua fangxiang" (Xi Jinping emphasized at the national conference on religious work: persist in the direction of Sinicization of our country's religions). *Xinhua News Agency*, 4 December 2021, http://politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2021/1204/c1024-32299688.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.

18 Ying 2019.

19 For detailed accounts of the PRC's policies on religion, see Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Koesel 2014; Potter 2003; Yang, Fenggang 2011; Ying 2021.

20 Pope Pius XII 1954.

21 Pope Pius XII 1958.

22 When used in the singular form, i.e. the open or underground community, I am referring to a split on a national scale. When used in the plural form, i.e. the open or underground communities, I am referring to specific local communities. For conflicts between the two communities, see Madsen 1998; "Detention of bishop 'done to disrupt' Chrism Mass." *UCA News*, 11 April 2017, https://www.ucanews.com/news/detention-of-bishop-done-to-disrupt-chrism-mass/78920. Accessed 21 May 2024; "Chinese underground bishop taken away briefly." *UCA News*, 28 March 2018, https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-underground-bishop-taken-away-briefly/81929. Accessed 21 May 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Despite repeated efforts by subsequent popes to open a dialogue with Beijing, the appointment of bishops remains a point of contention between the two states.[23] In 2018, the Vatican and Beijing reached a provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops. Since then, several bishops have been appointed with the mutual consent of both parties. Yet, conflicts continue in some dioceses, and thorny issues, such as the status of underground bishops, linger on.[24] As a "foreign" religion connected to a foreign sovereign, Catholicism is viewed as a key target for Sinicization.[25]

The Sinicization of Religions

The idea of Sinicization was first applied not to religions but to Marxism. As Fenggang Yang argues, Chairman Mao proposed the "*Zhongguohua* of Marxism" at a CCP congress in the 1930s. Since then, the idea of Sinicized Marxism has been adopted as a major guiding principle by subsequent PRC leaders.[26] In the religious realm, scholars of Buddhism and Christianity started to debate the Sinicization of the two religions in the 1980s. Yang argues that this discussion of Sinicization was scholarly, rather than politically motivated, and emerged as part of the "culture fever" that sprang up as some scholars capitalized on the partial liberalization that accompanied "reform and opening-up" to examine both foreign and traditional cultures. While these scholars did not necessarily share the state's goal of containing religions, their publications and ideas were nonetheless appropriated by state organs to support the Party's agenda.[27]

Richard Madsen argues that in the long history of religious development in China, practitioners and scholars of various types have been engaged in indigenization, localization and enculturation, or what he labels as "Sinicization from below," as distinguished from "Sinicization from above."[28] Sinicization from below is usually carried out in more or less organic ways by local communities. For example, in the case of Catholicism in China, long before the state promoted the idea of Sinicization, practitioners in local communities had already "localized" the faith in their own ways.[29] The creation of *beatas*, or Catholic virgins, is one such example.[30]

On the national level, the idea of Sinicization is a more recent creation. While its content may not be completely new, there is nonetheless a stronger focus on the hegemonic leadership of the Party. State-led Sinicization, or Sinicization-from-above, is the Party's attempt to forcefully ensure that all religions obediently toe the Party's line.[31] I refrain from using the term Sinicization-from-below, especially in the Catholic context. This is because the Catholic Church has long emphasized the importance of inculturation and, here, I will use inculturation to refer to Sinicization-from-below in the case of Catholicism in China.[32]

Sinicization as a national campaign to contain religions was arguably first concretized by President Xi in 2015 at the Central United Front Work Conference. In 2016, Xi further elaborated on the idea at the National Religious Work Conference. As reported by *Xinhua News Agency*, one of the Party's major mouthpieces, Xi emphasized that the Party must "firmly control the dominant position in religious work." Moreover, it must "actively guide religions to become compatible

23 Mok 2021.
24 Ibid.
25 For detailed accounts on the history and development of the Catholic Church in China, see Lozada, Jr 2002; Leung 2005; Madsen 1998; 2003; Mok 2021.
26 Yang, Fenggang 2021.
27 Ibid.
28 Madsen 2021b, 1.
29 Madsen 2019.
30 For more on Chinese women and the Catholic Church, see Chambon 2020; Li, Ji 2013; Menegon 2010.
31 Madsen 2019.
32 Fenggang Yang (2021) argues that to differentiate state-led Sinicization from locally initiated Sinicization, the former should be called "Chinafication." While convincingly argued, I use Sinicization to describe the Party's discourse and campaign. The major reason is to abide by the common usage in academia.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

with socialism, a major task is to support religions of [the] country to be persistently Sinicized. [The Party needs to] guide and educate people in the religious sector with the core values of socialism, so as to expand and develop the excellent Chinese tradition."[33] The aim was to homogenize religious practices so that they fall within the bounds of the Party's control.

Five years later, in 2021, Xi advocated an even more comprehensive version of the policy during another National Religious Work Conference.[34] The goal of Sinicization was clearly defined: to make religions compatible with socialist values (as defined by the Party), patriotism and collectivism. Traditional Confucian values were also brought into the discourse,[35] but ensuring compliance with the Party's leadership remained the top priority.[36]

The idea that religions have to be "guided" to ensure their compatibility with socialism is not new.[37] However, Xi's Sinicization policy is informed by national security issues in the face of souring relations with the West.[38] Sinicization is therefore a pivotal policy in fortifying the United Front work, "buttressing the position of the Communist Party, and [Xi's] leading role in it."[39] The 2018 revised "Regulations of religious affairs," for instance, has effectively extended the state's control to regulate every aspect of religion at the local level.[40]

Inculturation According to the Catholic Church

Inculturation has long been practised by the Catholic Church. However, it is the historic Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (hereafter Vatican II), convened in 1962, that gave the concept a strong theological foundation.[41] The term entered official Catholic documents in the 1970s, and has since been instituted as a teaching to guide the Church's engagement with different local cultures.[42] The concept has also been appropriated by Catholic leaders of the open community to support the Sinicization discourse. However, a closer look will show that there are essential differences between the original teaching and the appropriated one.

In *Ad Gentes*, the Vatican II's decree on missionary work, it is stated that "young churches … borrow from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and disciplines, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator."[43] Based on Vatican II, Pope John Paul II proclaimed his comprehensive teaching on inculturation in the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*. He argued that as the Church conducted its missionary work, it engaged in inculturation: "Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community."[44]

In addition, John Paul II hailed Matteo Ricci as a model of inculturation in China. Ricci was a famous Jesuit missionary who arrived in China in 1583. To root Catholicism in Chinese soil, he gained entry to the imperial court and spread the faith among the literati. He is credited with translating Catholic teachings into Chinese. At one point, even the emperor was drawn to the Catholic faith. Ricci's tolerance of ancestral worship among the Chinese, however, irked the Dominicans and

33 "Xi Jinping chuxi," *Xinhua News Agency*, 23 April 2016.
34 "Xi Jinping zai quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi shang," *Xinhua News Agency*, 4 December 2021.
35 Chen 2021; Madsen 2021a.
36 Ho 2023.
37 Leung 2005.
38 "Xi Jinping: yishi xingtai gongzuo," *Xinhua News Agency*, 20 August 2013; Zhuo 2019.
39 Ticozzi 2017, 101.
40 Ying 2019.
41 Ng 2020; Stanley 2007; Yang, Felipe 2024.
42 Stanley 2007.
43 *Ad Gentes*: Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, 1965, Para. 22, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.
44 Pope John Paul 1990, Para. 52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Franciscans, who complained to the pope. When the Holy See issued a ban on ancestor worship, the emperor banned Catholicism in return. This incident is known as the Chinese Rites controversy.

Addressing the International Ricci Studies Congress in 1982, John Paul II acknowledged the Jesuit missionary's success in "creating the conditions for making Christ known and embodying his Gospel message and the Church in the context of the Chinese culture."[45] Then, in 2001, he again recognized Ricci's inculturation work: "And just as the Fathers of the Church had done centuries before in the encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Greco-Roman culture, Father Ricci made this insight the basis of his patient and far-sighted work of inculturation of the faith in China."[46] Pope Benedict XVI later reiterated the same point.[47]

However, inculturation is not understood to be unconditional. John Paul II laid out several conditions, which are in contention with the principles of Sinicization. First, inculturation "must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith."[48] In other words, inculturation must be compatible with the "objective requirements of the faith."[49] Second, bishops must caution against "overestimation" of culture. Fidelity and communion with the universal Church must be ensured. Third, inculturation needs to be "guided and encouraged, but not forced."[50]

There were attempts by the leaders of the open community and the government to equate inculturation with Sinicization.[51] However, within the framework of Sinicization, political obedience is always the top priority. In contrast, nowhere in *Redemptoris Missio* does the pope preach that inculturation demands support for political leaders. In fact, it is explicitly written that "[i]t is not the Church's mission to work directly on the economic, technical or political levels, or to contribute materially to development."[52] *Redemptoris Missio* also stresses that the Church should take a stand "in the face of the corruption of political or economic power."[53]

The papacy of Pope Francis, who was eager to build relations with Beijing, was relatively ambiguous on inculturation and Sinicization.[54] Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Holy See's secretary for relations with states under Francis, argued in a speech that "when considering mission and theological reflection, two expressions or, more precisely, two principles stand out, which should interact with each other, namely 'Sinicization' and 'inculturation'."[55] He also capitalized on the legacy of Ricci to justify his case.

A Theoretical Framework: Public Transcript

Madsen's seminal book on Catholicism in China is based on the theoretical concept of civil society. He suggests that future works on the same topic could "analyze the patterns of reasoning that Catholics use in applying their moral principles to the dilemmas of ordinary life."[56] Partially responding to Madsen's call, this paper stems from a larger project that examines how Catholics in post-reform China make ethical evaluations. To conceptualize how Catholics respond to the national discourse on Sinicization, I borrow the concept of public transcript for analysis.

The political anthropologist James C. Scott, studying class struggle, argues that there are two types of transcripts, defined as "collective cultural product[s]," in society: public and

45 Pope John Paul II 2006a, 307.
46 Pope John Paul II 2006b.
47 Pope Benedict XVI 2009.
48 Pope John Paul II 1990, Para. 52.
49 Ibid., Para. 53.
50 Ibid., Para. 54.
51 Li, Jingxi 2021; Ma 2019.
52 Pope John Paul II 1990, Para. 58.
53 Ibid., Para. 43.
54 Mok 2021.
55 Gallagher 2018.
56 Madsen 1998, 10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

hidden.[57] A public transcript "is designed to … affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites."[58] A hidden transcript, on the other hand, is a "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."[59] Following this, the national discourse on Sinicization can be conceptualized as a public transcript upheld by the Party.[60]

One of Scott's key contributions is to direct attention to the cultural and moral dimensions of life under domination.[61] However, this framework contains a major shortcoming in that it is binary in nature: one either belongs to the dominant or to the dominated class. This dichotomous setting is oversimplified. For instance, in post-reform China, it is often shown that local officials do not always strictly follow Beijing's policy directions.[62] Moreover, the Catholic Church also maintains its own public transcript, placing Catholic practitioners in a position where they must navigate the expectations of both the Catholic Church and the state. To suggest that the Church also upholds its public transcript does not imply the naturalization of its dominating power. Rather, my argument is that it, too, produces publicly available cultural constructs, and Catholic practitioners are often compelled to uphold them. It would also be misleading to portray members of local churches as necessarily maintaining a unified hidden transcript. First, Catholic leaders and everyday practitioners have different concerns and expectations. Second, as aforementioned, different Catholic communities may be in conflict with one another. And finally, transcripts produced by local communities are often not unknown to the state.

Carsten Vala borrows Scott's framework to analyse official and non-registered Protestant churches in China.[63] He rejects a "domination-resistance paradigm," which some scholars adopt, and instead proposes a "domination-negotiation perspective." Vala's central argument is that the state's public transcript is an arena of negotiation. For example, he documents how the Protestant "three-self" patriotic movement tried to negotiate a public transcript that was based on values shared by both official and unregistered churches. In a similar vein, public transcripts in the Chinese context can also be understood as performances where citizens interact with state representatives.[64] This nuanced understanding of public transcripts informs this paper. As will be shown in the analysis, Catholic leaders in China try to appropriate the Church's public transcript to promote that of the state. However, the interviewees, as everyday practitioners, largely adhere to the Catholic Church's transcript, forming a loose consensus over the expectations set forth by both the Church and the state.

Method and Data

To investigate how the Catholic leaders of the open community publicly respond to Sinicization at the national level, I mainly looked to *Catholic Church in China* (*Zhongguo Tianzhujiao* 中国天主教), a bimonthly journal founded in 1964 and governed by the Patriotic Association (later together with the Bishops' Conference). It contains contributions by major Catholic leaders, as well as writings by laypeople and scholars. More importantly, it has published all the major speeches by leaders of the "One association and one conference," as well as senior officials of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (formerly Bureau of Religious Affairs). All published articles are reviewed by the Patriotic Association and therefore reflect the official discourse.

57 Scott 1990, 9.
58 Ibid., 18.
59 Ibid., 4.
60 Jin and Koesel 2024.
61 Marche 2012.
62 Koesel 2014; Reny 2018; Spires 2011.
63 Vala 2018.
64 Diselhorst and Fu 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is questionable whether public speeches and writings represent what leaders *genuinely* believe. However, this is not what this paper is concerned with. In fact, Chinese Catholic leaders' public discourse represents one significant response to the state's campaign. As shown below, while leaders strictly follow the Party's line, they also appropriate the Church's transcript to "package" the discourse.

To gauge the critical responses of everyday Catholic practitioners in China, I relied mainly on data gathered from interviews. From 2020 to 2023, I conducted 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. There were three groups of interviewees. The first included Catholics born in mainland China (N = 23), including clerics, religious brothers and sisters, and laypeople. During the time of the interviews, these interviewees were mostly residing outside of the mainland, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe and North America. Some were studying and planned to return to the mainland in the near future. Some were serving in the Hong Kong diocese, while a small number had left the mainland owing to political difficulties. Among this group included a former high-ranking member of the Patriotic Association.

I mainly approached interviewees who were living outside of the mainland for reasons of safety and accessibility. This raises a question of bias, as these interviewees were no longer residing on the mainland. However, this group included both members of the underground and the open communities, and interviewees came from many different parts of China. This should partially address concerns with both geographical diversity and split views within the Catholic Church.

The second group of interviewees included Hong Kong-born Catholics who had made repeated trips to the mainland to visit the Catholic communities there since the country opened up in 1978 (N = 25). Also included in this group were two practitioners who were born in the mainland but who had been living in Hong Kong for decades. They also had made repeated trips to the mainland since the 1980s. The interviewees in this group offered different services to the mainland communities, including teaching in seminaries, donation of resources, counselling and social services, passing on messages and documents from Rome, and journalistic reporting.

Hong Kong Catholics do not represent Catholics on the mainland. For a long time, Hong Kong Catholics seldom experienced any direct harassment by the authorities. However, the focus of this paper is not "the critical responses of *Chinese* Catholics," but the "critical responses of *Catholics in China*." I am targeting Catholics who have the experience of being and acting as a Catholic in mainland China after 1978. In fact, as will be shown below, both groups of interviewees gave very similar responses. The implementation of the national security law in Hong Kong in 2020 has undeniably brought the city much closer to the mainland in terms of political arrangements. In November 2023, Archbishop Joseph Li Shan 李山 of Beijing, who is also the president of the Patriotic Association, visited Hong Kong. During his visit, the diocesan Holy Spirit Study Centre and certain bodies on the mainland co-organized a "theological seminar" on the Sinicization of Catholicism. Both Archbishop Li and Cardinal Stephen Chow, SJ 周守仁 of Hong Kong attended the session.[65] Catholics in Hong Kong were no longer immune to the Sinicization campaign.

Finally, I also interviewed two foreign missionaries who were based in Hong Kong and who had made many missionary trips to the mainland. Both were from Europe and were fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese. Although they would not identify themselves as Chinese, their knowledge and experiences informed their responses and are relevant to this study.

I followed two approaches to reach out to potential interviewees. First, I searched through the directories of different dioceses, religious orders and Catholic institutes. Once I had identified individuals with experience of serving the Church in China, I proceeded to send out invitation letters or emails. Second, I relied on snowballing to develop more contacts. My methods are not intended to

65 "Beijing zhujiao Li Shan huifang Xianggang, Zhou shuji jiedai fenxiang xiongdi qingyi" (Bishop Li Shan of Beijing paid a return visit to Hong Kong, Cardinal Chow held reception and shared brotherhood). *Kung Kao Po*, 17 November 2023, https://kkp.org.hk/node/detail/50947/. Accessed 17 November 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

achieve statistical representation. Instead, I follow a case logic, which aims for saturation, where "the very last case examined will provide very little new or surprising information."[66] Interviewing also offers "rich and textured data that provide insight into participants' understandings, accounts, perceptions and interpretations."[67] As will be shown below, my interviews have arguably reached saturation, providing rich data for analysis.

Some of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner. Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions from 2020 to 2022, most interviews were conducted via secured online platforms. The interviews were carried out either in Mandarin or Cantonese, except for one in English. All translations are mine, and pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect my respondents.[68]

It is argued that extensive ethnographic or survey research might be required to understand how ordinary lay believers understand Sinicization. Indeed, conducting ethnography is necessary if we are to investigate how local Catholics execute or resist concrete Sinicization projects, such as the organization of study camps. Yet, Sinicization is first and foremost a state's discourse (or an "ideological scheme"[69]). The textual and interviewing data afford an investigation into how Catholic practitioners engage with Sinicization ideologically and discursively.[70]

National Leaders of the Church: Embracing the State Ideology and Appropriating the Church's Teachings

The leaders of the open Catholic community did not (or could not) wait long to incorporate Sinicization into their key agenda. In 2016, the Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference were both revised to include the phrase "adhere to the direction of Sinicization."[71] In 2018, the "One association and one conference" launched the "Five-year plan on carrying forward the Catholic Church's adherence to the direction of Sinicization in our country,"[72] which was followed by another similar five-year plan, launched in 2023.[73] Using the content of Xi's 2015 speech as the guiding thought, the Church's leadership wrote that the goal of the first five-year plan was to "push forward mutual adaptation between the Catholic Church and the socialist society," and "[c]lerics and Catholics must be led to implement the core values of socialism as well as to strengthen their own base to push forward with evangelization and pastoral work."[74] Several major tasks were identified. The first among all was, as instructed by Xi, to "[deepen] political, legal and social recognition of the Catholic Church in China" by promoting socialist education, insisting on the principle of "independence and self-administration," strengthening the concept of the rule by law, and engaging in socioeconomic development.[75] Sinicization also touched on the cultural aspect, including liturgical forms, architectural expression and theological development.

66 Small 2009, 25.
67 Knott et al. 2022, 2
68 See Table 1 in the Appendix for the full list of interviewees.
69 Madsen 2021b, 4.
70 Some mainland dioceses actively promoted Sinicization by launching a series of events. For example, since 2016, the Diocese of Sanyuan, led by Bishop Joseph Han Yingjin, has orchestrated visits by local officials, curated art exhibitions and organized variety shows, all in the name of Sinicization (Xinyou Film and Television 2021). This paper, however, focuses on the discursive aspect.
71 Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association 2018, https://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/report/17020797-1.htm. Accessed 16 November 2023; Constitution of Bishops' Conference of Catholic Church in China 2018, https://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/report/23050547-1.htm. Accessed 16 November 2023.
72 Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China 2018.
73 Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China 2023.
74 Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China 2018.
75 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Sinicization of religion entails putting politics above all else.[76] Some Catholic leaders were very straightforward in expressing their support for the Party's leadership. For instance, Bishop Joseph Guo Jincai 郭金才, one of eight illicitly ordained bishops who were forgiven by Pope Francis in 2018, argued in a speech that the Church in China had "made an active contribution to supporting the leadership of the Communist Party, supporting the socialist system, and defending the unity of the motherland."[77] As the secretary general of the Bishops' Conference, Bishop Guo elaborated his stance:

> To insist on the direction of the Sinicization of our country's Catholicism is to guide [the Church] with the core values of socialism as guidance, and soak it in Chinese culture … It is to make interpretations that are compatible with the demands of the development of contemporary China and the excellent traditional Chinese culture, so that religions of our country can have more Chinese characteristics, Chinese styles and Chinese manner.[78]

Guo had essentially copied key phrases from Xi's pronouncement. In public speeches and writings, sequence often matters. In Guo's articulation, guiding the Church with the core values of socialism came before soaking Catholicism with Chinese culture.

Similarly, in 2023, Bishop Joseph Shen Bin 沈斌 of Shanghai, the president of the Bishops' Conference, explicitly declared that the foundation of Sinicization was to enhance practitioners' political identification and to continuously strengthen ideological and political education centred around patriotism.[79] Some bishops have made reference to the cultural dimension of Sinicization. For example, Bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin 马英林, the former president of the Bishops' Conference, lauded how a shrine in Shanxi had been built in Chinese style.[80] Yet, it remains clear that Sinicization is, above all, concerned with political loyalty; Chinese culture takes a secondary position.

To convince their followers to accept Sinicization, these leaders appropriate the teachings of the Bible and the Catholic Church. Saint Paul, an apostle of Jesus, is repeatedly referred to in public speeches and writings, usually upholding his phrase: "I have become all things to all" (1 Corinthians 9:22). According to their reasoning, as Saint Paul became all things to preach to all, the Catholic Church should also explore ways to adapt to the state, society and culture.[81] Since China has a special system, as the reasoning goes, the Church has developed a governing system with Chinese characteristics, characterized by, for example, the existence of the Patriotic Association and other governing structures not seen in other parts of the world. Bishop Joseph Ma once argued:

> For the past 70 years, the Catholic Church in China [has] followed the teaching of Saint Paul the Apostle to "become all things to all people," adapting to the national conditions and the actual circumstances of the Church. In the process of pastoral care and evangelization, it has gradually explored and developed a system of church governance with Chinese characteristics that both inherits the spirits of the tradition and incorporates contemporary experiences.[82]

76 Ma 2019; 2021; Shen 2022; Wang, Huaimao 2021.
77 Guo 2022, 7.
78 Ibid., 7–8.
79 "Tianzhujiao Shanghai jiaoqu Shen Bin zhujiao: 'Zhongguohua' shi fangxiangxing wenti" (Bishop Shen Bin of the Catholic Diocese of Shanghai: Sinicization is a matter of direction). *Faith Weekly*, 16 October 2023, https://www.xinde.org/show/54269. Accessed 16 November 2023.
80 Ma 2019.
81 Fang 2019; Guo 2022; Ma 2019.
82 Ma 2019, 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is worth highlighting that in the article, Bishop Ma did touch upon cultural aspects, such as how the architectural design of the National Seminary's chapel was inspired by the Temple of Heaven.[83] The primary emphasis, however, was on church governance.

In addition, the Vatican II's call for empowering lay people,[84] and "the doctrine concerning bishops, the successors of the apostles, who together with the successor of Peter … govern the house of the living God,"[85] are also appropriated to justify the "collective leadership" of the "One association and one conference."[86] Bishop Ma specifically singled out the phrase "governing together" (*gongtong guanli* 共同管理) from *Lumen Gentium* to justify the Party's version of "democratic management" (*minzhu banjiao* 民主办教):

> The Second Vatican Council also proclaimed the need for "governing together" within the Church, instituting equality among its various levels. It called for granting local churches a degree of autonomy to achieve the localization of the Church … Therefore, the democratic management of the Church in China aligns well with the current global trends in Catholicism.[87]

This is a clear example of how principles set by the Vatican II are appropriated to legitimize a state's sanctioned arrangement of Church governance.

Another strategy adopted by the Catholic leaders in China is to point to exemplary figures to justify their reasoning. A widely appropriated figure is the influential Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci. Given Ricci's efforts at enculturating the Catholic faith, it is not surprising that he has been made a champion of Sinicization. Ricci had been commended by the leaders for interpreting the Church's teachings according to Chinese culture and thereby rendering the faith compatible with Chinese society:

> Historically, missionaries like Matteo Ricci drew inspiration from traditional Chinese culture to interpret Catholic doctrine. They found a path suitable for the development of the Catholic Church in China and allowed the Gospel to spread across the Chinese land. We should always bear in mind historical experiences, integrate with the national and ecclesiastical situations, and provide interpretations of doctrine and laws that align with the contemporary development and progress in China, as well as with the interpretation of excellent traditional culture.[88]

Ricci's approach was labelled a success.[89] The Party also noticed the utility of using Ricci as a model.[90]

Catholic leaders on the national level collaborate with Party officials to substantiate and validate the discursive content of Sinicization. In other words, they blend two sets of public transcripts, that of the state and of the Church, to cultivate a "Sinicization discourse with Catholic characteristics." Again, this research does not intend to examine whether the public speeches are authentic

83 Ibid., 6.
84 *Apostolicum Actuositatem:* Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.
85 *Lumen Gentium:* Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964, Para. 18, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.
86 Zong 2017.
87 Ibid., 29.
88 Fang 2019, 7.
89 Ma 2019.
90 Wang, Zuoan 2017.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

reflections of the leaders' thoughts. The focus lies in demonstrating how they actively appropriate the Church's transcript to corroborate that of the state.

Beyond the Leadership Level: Critical Responses of Everyday Practitioners

Despite the state's active and forceful promotion, the openly expressed support of the leadership of the open community and even the Holy See's ambiguities, none of my interviewees embraced the transcript of Sinicization. I inductively identified three discursive strategies adopted by the respondents in response to the state's discourse: rejection, evasion and empathy. First, the majority of the interviewees rejected the discourse by questioning the "real meaning" behind the term "Sinicization." They differentiated it from the Church's advocacy of inculturation by making it clear that Sinicization was about politics, while inculturation was about culture and customs (N = 38). With regard to evasion, a number of them did not directly address the concept but instead switched the discussion to inculturation. However, unlike the leaders of the open community, they did not equate Sinicization with inculturation either. Instead, they simply did not talk about politics (N = 10). Finally, with regard to empathy, a very small number of the interviewees voiced their understanding of why the Party would want to Sinicize the Church – but without expressing approval (N = 2). Following the Church's transcript, the interviewees used the teaching of inculturation as the basis to their response to Sinicization.

It is surprising that the interviewees overwhelmingly aligned with the Church's transcript of inculturation and questioned Sinicization. Some, like well-educated clerics, were more articulate, but lay interviewees were also well versed in countering the state's transcript with that of the Church. The data show that the Church's transcript, hidden or not, is prevalent and authoritative among practitioners.

Rejection

As mentioned above, the Party and the national leadership of the open community deliberately blend Sinicization with the Church's teaching on inculturation. The strategy of rejection reverts this process by asserting that inculturation and Sinicization, as two transcripts, are fundamentally different, with the latter aiming at political control of the Church.

Rev. Pak's response serves as a "model answer" of rejection. A cleric from Hong Kong who has many engagements with the Church in the mainland, he argued:

> [T]he Church talks about inculturation, too. It seems [that Sinicization and inculturation] are the same on the surface, but in fact [they are] not. You have to look at their explanation; the devil is in the detail. Words are interpreted by people. So, if you look at the explanation of Sinicization, it's actually to make it have some Chinese characteristics … which means serving the Party. Sinicization means putting the Church under the Party, and that's how to understand it.[91]

Here, Pak equates Sinicization with the Party's attempt to ideologically and politically subdue the Church.

This line of reasoning was used by many of the interviewees who rejected Sinicization: "Integrating with culture does not mean integrating with ideology. Communism is not part of Chinese culture, it is a foreign import";[92] and "The so-called Sinicization of faith means to believe in the Communist Party and take the Communist Party as the leading religion."[93] Rev. Andre, a

91 Interview 22.
92 Interview 18.
93 Interview 24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

foreign missionary who is well connected to a number of mainland dioceses, dismissed Sinicization for being "Xi-nicization,"[94] while a mainland cleric ridiculed the state's campaign: "Even *Huawei* 华为 is talking about Sinicization!"[95]

Two more examples further illustrate the point. Rev. Ma is a cleric from an open community in central China. He roundly rejected Sinicization, arguing that the Church had long advocated inculturation instead. He gave the example of how the Church in Vietnam allowed the use of incense sticks during liturgical celebrations. He accused the Party of "hiding something" behind the slogan: "[Sinicization] means that the Catholic Church in China should accept the leadership of the Communist Party. This is your [i.e. the Party's] real intention. You have no interest in integrating [Catholicism] with Chinese culture, and you will definitely not help us."[96]

Barbara is a lay Catholic from southern China who follows the underground community. She did not have the formal theological training of clerics, and was very blunt in her criticism of the Party's Sinicization attempt. According to her, the campaign was aimed at forcing religious practitioners to "faithfully believe (*xinyang* 信仰) in the Communist Party." It was a part of the Party's "education of fear" and "control over religions."[97] Although Rev. Ma and Barbara came from different backgrounds, they shared the same sentiments towards the Sinicization of religions.

Interviewees who rejected Sinicization were not necessarily hostile towards the Party. For example, Rev. Chau, a Hong Kong cleric who was among the first to travel to the mainland in the 1980s, had some sympathy for the Chinese government and yet he was also critical of Sinicization: "I wouldn't use that term because things are not yet clear." He then explained how even inculturation itself could also lead to problems if not cautiously executed:

> If there are contradictions [between the Bible and] Chinese culture, you may not necessarily have to use those elements … If you let [Chinese culture] dominate [the Bible], would it distort the Bible? This is a question that must be considered and discussed. You cannot simply do anything you want just because of Sinicization. You cannot.

Although Rev. Chau did not explicitly point to the political connotation of the term, he emphasized the supremacy of the Bible over the government and local cultures: "The messages of the Bible, such as those about love, cannot become secondary. [Otherwise, it would lead to] the negligence of the love of God and the love of Christ. Those cannot be decided by a regime."[98] I asked Rev. Chau to give an example of how the Bible might be distorted. He mentioned a case, reported in the news, where the biblical story of a woman condemned for adultery was twisted to suit the state's discourse:

> They want to stone a woman, but Jesus says whoever is without sin should cast the first stone. Then those people leave. And Jesus tells the woman that he does not condemn her either, but instead asks her to go and sin no more. However, some people interpreted it differently and said that she should be punished, and they distorted the words of Jesus to support their view. This is a complete distortion of the Bible. How can we accept it?[99]

Andrew, a lay Catholic who advocates engaging with the Party, also made it clear that it was "impossible to accept" any rewriting of the Bible: "On some occasions, we need to stand firm."[100]

94 Interview 8.
95 *Huawei* is a leading information and communication technology firm in China.
96 Interview 37.
97 Interview 24.
98 Interview 10.
99 Ibid.
100 Interview 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Some of the interviewees who rejected Sinicization were ardent supporters of inculturation. Rev. Chiu, a cleric from Hong Kong, believed that inculturation should be all encompassing. He made a case for integrating Catholicism with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, the three thought systems that he believed, citing the Chinese essayist Lin Yutang 林语堂, "were flowing in the blood of us Chinese." He shared with me that he had a statue of Kṣitigarbha, a Buddhist bodhisattva, in his room and compared Kṣitigarbha to Saint Peter: "Kṣitigarbha once said, 'Even if I have been practising for so many years and can become a Buddha, but if hell is not empty, I vow not to become a Buddha' … I think this is extreme greatness. I think he is even stronger than Peter, the great disciple of Jesus."[101] However, despite expressing such appreciation for Chinese culture, Rev. Chiu rejected Sinicization as a "self-centred," "top-down" campaign mobilized by Chinese officials, demonstrating that it is not just the strict or traditionalist Catholics who reject Sinicization; it is also opposed by progressives or even mavericks.[102]

Evasion

Another group of interviewees avoided entering into a discussion of the political elements of Sinicization. They would turn to inculturation instead, emphasizing how the Church should engage with Chinese culture. However, they did not express any approval of the state's transcript either.

Sister Lin is a religious sister from the open community on the mainland.[103] At the time of the interview, she was serving in Hong Kong, although she frequently returned to her hometown. She explained that the government's policy was largely "fair" to the open community. When asked about Sinicization, she immediately began to explain liturgical localization instead, emphasizing that it was not against the faith. She also mentioned how the church in her hometown was built with traditional Chinese characteristics, and that every country had its own version of the Virgin Mary statue. Throughout the interview, she stressed that she loved her country, but never once did she express any approval of the Party.

Rev. Tan, a cleric from an underground community in east China, presented a similar case.[104] He first praised the inculturation efforts of Matteo Ricci, and then explained that different people might interpret Sinicization differently. He cautiously added that the key was to avoid adding in political ideologies. Rev. Tan did not reject Sinicization immediately, but he was nonetheless very careful. Some interviewees evaded the discussion owing to their lack of understanding of the term. For instance, a Hong Kong lay Catholic said she was worried about Sinicization but then explained that she did not really understand what it meant.[105]

It is worth noting that Cardinal Stephen Chow, SJ, the Bishop of Hong Kong since 2021, has also adopted a strategy of evasion publicly. In an interview given to *La Civilta Cattolica*, a Jesuit publication supervised by the Holy See's Secretariat of State, Chow was asked to comment on the state's discourse. In response, he claimed that the Catholic Church on the mainland was still grappling with the meaning of the term. He explained:

> According to one of the government officials whom we met during the trip,[106] Sinicization is similar to our concept of inculturation. So, I think that it is better not to jump to a conclusion regarding Sinicization for now. It should be more helpful to hold further dialogue on the topic.[107]

101 Interview 18.
102 Ibid.
103 Interview 7.
104 Interview 47.
105 Interview 28.
106 Chow visited Beijing in April 2023.
107 Spadaro, SJ 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

While he did not embrace the slogan in the same way as the leaders of the national open community did, he also avoided giving a concrete answer.

Empathy

Only two of my interviewees expressed empathy with the Party. Rev. Hao, who is from the mainland, tried to understand the rationale behind the Party's transcript of Sinicization. He believed that the Party had studied Catholicism carefully and was aware of the Catholic Church's influence globally. The government, he argued, feared that Chinese Catholics might be "brainwashed" by Western thoughts, and that people did not know about the past wrongs perpetrated by Western colonial powers against China:

> We … need to know why the Communist Party hates Western powers, hates the United States and these countries, because they did make big mistakes in the past, such as colonial massacres and so on, including the First World War and the Second World War, which took place in the areas of our Catholic tradition and were caused by these people who believed in Christ.[108]

He suggested therefore that Catholic clerics and religious brothers and sisters in China should learn more about Chinese culture. The goal, however, was not to align with the state; it was for the good of the Church, "so as not to let them catch our shortcomings."[109]

Rev. Tian, another cleric from the underground community, explained that he believed that the Party promoted Sinicization because it feared universal values. He judged that the campaign was focused more on Islam in Xinjiang. It is crucial to point out that neither Rev. Hao nor Rev. Tian approved of Sinicization. Despite acknowledging the Party's rationale, they did not endorse the transcript.

Summary

Neither biographical data (for example, age or gender) nor positionality can fully explain the different strategies adopted by interviewees. For example, both Rev. Ma and Rev. Tan are well-educated clerics from the mainland.[110] The former rejected Sinicization altogether, while the latter evaded discussion of political loyalty.

The more significant discovery is the *commonality* shown by the interview data, not the differences. Each strategy is adopted for different reasons, yet none adheres to the Party's transcript. Rejection explicitly opposes the discourse on Sinicization. Evasion and empathy may be less resistant, but neither strategy accepts the state's campaign. The diverse backgrounds of the interviewees have not prevented them from sharing a basic distrust of the political nature of the Sinicization of Catholicism.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examines how Catholic practitioners in China (en)counter the discourse and campaign of Sinicization promoted by the Communist Party. Through textual analysis, it investigates how leaders of the open community at the national level appropriate the Church's teachings on inculturation to publicly advocate the state's discourse, thereby blending the two public transcripts. Using interview data, the paper also finds that everyday Catholic practitioners emphatically

108 Interview 33.
109 Ibid.
110 Interview 37; interview 47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

disapprove of the state's transcript. The majority of the interviewees distinguished between inculturation and Sinicization and equated the latter with political control. A small number either evaded any discussion of politics or cautiously expressed empathy with the Party's rationale. None of the responses endorsed the Sinicization campaign.

A possible reason for such a manifestation of consensus among the interviewees is that the Catholic Church in China, as a part of the Latin Church, has a hierarchical structure, which is headed by the pope. Both the open and underground communities frequently stress their loyalty to the Church with the pope as its head. The belief that there is only one Catholic Church, with Rome as its centre, strongly shapes practitioners' understanding of the state's transcript.[111] Hence, a Sinicization discourse that stresses adherence to the Party's leadership over the Holy See ironically stimulates a loose consensus of views among everyday Catholics. They may disagree sharply on how to handle the Party's demand in practical terms, but they (en)counter the campaign discursively as a "united front." While deep conflicts between the open and underground communities continue in certain dioceses, and occasionally "uncivil characteristics" can still be observed in some insular communities,[112] emphasizing certain aspects of the Church's transcript may foster constructive internal dialogue. Moreover, the findings concerning the discursive strategies adopted agree with recent research that highlights the "creative efforts and commitment"[113] of Catholics in China.[114]

It is also noteworthy that none of the respondents mentioned anything proposed by the Church leaders at the national level. This shows that despite the Chinese Catholic leaders' public embrace of the state's transcript and their concerted attempts to blend it with the Church's transcript, their public statements are often not taken seriously by everyday practitioners. A possible reason is that those public statements are so incongruent with the Church's core teachings that they are not perceived as authoritative.

Why, in contrast to their leaders and the Protestant "three-self" patriotic movement, do everyday Catholics in China refuse to engage with the state's public transcript?[115] Some tentative explanations can be derived from the interview data. First, Sinicization is top-down campaign with strong political connotations. Even though accepting of the Church's call for inculturation, the interviewees refused to recognize Sinicization as an organic process of integrating their faith with Chinese culture. The case of Rev. Chiu is telling: he willingly integrated his belief in the teachings of Kṣitigarbha with his Catholic faith, but opposed the Sinicization of his religion. Second, since Sinicization is directed at religious governance and targets some fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church, believers might find it threatening. As shown above, Rev. Chau, who sometimes sympathized with the Party, was wary of reported distortions of biblical texts.

Finally, there is the fundamental incompatibility between the ideology of the atheist Chinese Communist state, which has grown more militant under Xi's rule, and Catholicism.[116] The Chinese state is unlikely to integrate Catholicism as part of its transcript. Equally, it is also unlikely to tolerate its subjects expressing loyalty to a foreign power. Catholics are thus placed in a position that leaves little room for integrating two conflicting ethical systems. The findings suggest that future research on how Sinicization is received should also take the structures and teachings of different religious groups into consideration.

Acknowledgments. The author would like to thank Samson Yuen, Wing Chung Ho and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments. The author is also grateful to Stanley R. Bailey, Yang Su, Francesca Polletta, Kim Fortun and David

111 Mok 2023.
112 Madsen 1998, 15.
113 Chambon 2020, 15.
114 See also Yeh 2023.
115 Vala 2018.
116 Yang, Fenggang 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

A. Snow for their guidance on the research that contributed to the writing of this article. The research is supported by the Kugelman Research Fellowship from the UCI Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, and a grant from the Long US–China Institute.

Competing interests. None.

References

Cao, Nanlai. 2010. *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Chambon, Michel. 2020. "Chinese Catholic nuns and the organization of religious life in contemporary China." *Religions* **10** (447), 1–17.

Chen, Yong. 2021. "'Official Confucianism' as newly sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party." In Richard Madsen (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*. Leiden: Brill, 44–63.

Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China. 2018. "Five-year work plan for advancing adherence to the direction of Sinification of Catholicism in our nation (2018–2022)," https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/five-year-work-plan-for-advancing-adherence-of-catholicism-in-our-nation-to-the-direction-of-sinification-%ef%bc%882018-2022%ef%bc%89/. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China. 2023. "Shenru tuijin woguo Tianzhujiao Zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2023–2027)" (The outline of the five-year work plan for deeply advancing adherence to the direction of the Sinification of Catholicism in our nation, 2023–2027), http://www.catholicsh.org/NewListIn.aspx?InfosID=15815&InfoCategoryID=19. Accessed 15 March 2024.

Choi, Eun Kyong, John Wagner Givens and Andrew MacDonald. 2021. "From power balance to dominant faction in Xi Jinping's China." *The China Quarterly* **248**, 935–956.

Distelhorst, Greg, and Diana Fu. 2019. "Performing authoritarian citizenship: public transcripts in China." *Perspectives on Politics* **17**(1), 106–121.

Economy, Elizabeth. 2018. *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fang, John Xingyao. 2019. "Zai diliujie Tianzhujiao Zhongguohua shenxue luntan kaimoshi shang zhici" (The speech given at the opening ceremony of the Sixth Theological Forum on the Sinicization of Catholicism). *Catholic Church in China* **5**, 7–8.

Gallagher, Paul R. 2018. "Intervention by Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for relations with states of the Holy See: a fruitful encounter – Christianity and China," https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2018/documents/rc-seg-st-20180322_gallagher-cristianesimoecina_en.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. 2011. *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Guo, Joseph Jincai. 2022. "Xuexi guanche quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi jingshen, jianding woguo Tianzhujiao Zhongguohua fangxiang" (Learning and implementing the spirit of the National Assembly on Religious Work, strengthening the direction of Sinicization of our country's Catholicism). *Catholic Church in China* **1**, 7–9.

Ho, Wai-Yip. 2023. "Islam, chineseness and citizenship: Sinicizing Muslim minority, becoming Chinese citizen." *Citizenship Studies* **27**(6), 712-726.

Jin, Peitong, and Karrie J. Koesel. 2024. "Church and state in contemporary China: securing Christianity." *Politics and Religion* **17**(1), 107–137.

Knott, Eleanor, Aliya Hamid Rao, Kate Summers and Chana Teeger. 2022. "Interviews in the social sciences." *Nature Reviews: Methods Primers* **2**(73), 1–15.

Koesel, Karrie J. 2014. *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kou, Chien-wen. 2017. "Xi Jinping in command: solving the principal–agent problem in CCP–PLA relations?" *The China Quarterly* **232**, 866–885.

Lam, Anthony Sui-ki. 1994. *Shuizhu fuchen: Zhongguo Tianzhujiao dangdai lishi fansheng* (*Who Rules Over? Historical Reflections on Contemporary China's Catholicism*). Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre.

Leung, Beatrice. 2005. "China's religious freedom policy: the art of managing religious activity." *The China Quarterly* **184**, 894–913.

Li, Ji. 2013. "Chinese Christian virgins and Catholic communities of women in northeast China." *The Chinese Historical Review* **20**(1), 16–32.

Li, Jingxi. 2021. "Guanyu Tianzhujiao Zhongguohua de sikao" (Thoughts on the Sinicization of Catholicism). *Catholic Church in China* **6**, 27–29.

Liu, Hui, and Xiaochun Zhao. 2014. *Annual Report on China's National Security Studies*. Beijing: Center for International Strategy and Security Studies.

Lozada, Jr, Eriberto P. 2002. *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ma, Joseph Yinglin. 2019. "Yu zuguo tongxing, kaichuang jiaohui Zhongguohua xintiandi" (Walking with the motherland, creating the new heaven and new earth of the Church's Sinicization). *Catholic Church in China* **4**, 4–6.

Ma, Joseph Yinglin. 2021. "Jianding aiguo aijiao, yu dang tongxin tongxing: qingzhu Zhongguo gongchandang chengli yibai zhounian" (Unwaveringly love the country and love the Church, walking with the Party with the same heart: celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party). *Catholic Church in China* **3**, 5–7.

Madsen, Richard. 1998. *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Madsen, Richard. 2003. "Catholic revival during the reform era." *The China Quarterly* **174**, 468–487.

Madsen, Richard. 2019. "The Chinese Catholic Church: between Rome and Beijing and Sinicization from above and below." *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* **6**, 5–23.

Madsen, Richard (ed.). 2021a. *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*. Leiden: Brill.

Madsen, Richard. 2021b. "Introduction." In Richard Madsen (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*. Leiden: Brill, 1–15.

Marche, Guillaume. 2012. "Why infrapolitics matters." *Revue Francaise d-Etudes Amercaines* **131**, 3–18.

Menegon, Eugenio. 2010. *Ancestors, Virgins, and Friars: Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mok, C.W. John. 2021. "Sino-Vatican rapprochement: an assessment of Pope Francis' realpolitik and the provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops." *Journal of Contemporary China* **30**(129), 386–401.

Mok, C.W. John. 2023. "Between God and the state: how Catholics make ethical evaluations in authoritarian China." Paper presented at the 37th Biennial ISSR Conference, Taipei, 5 July.

Ng, Robert. 2020. "*Shensi* yu bendihua" (*Spirit* and inculturation). *Spirit* **121**, 1–15.

Pope Benedict XVI. 2009. "Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the death of Fr. Matteo Ricci," https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090506_ricci.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Pope John Paul II. 1990. "*Redemptoris missio*: on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate," https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Pope John Paul II. 2006a. "Matteo Ricci established a bridge between the Church and the Chinese culture (October 25, 1982)." In Betty Ann Maheu, MM (ed.), *Papal Documents Related to China 1937–2005*. Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre, 303–312.

Pope John Paul II. 2006b. "Message of Pope John Paul II, fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in Beijing (October 24, 2001)." In Betty Ann Maheu, MM (ed.), *Papal Documents Related to China 1937–2005*. Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre, 313–320.

Pope Pius XII. 1954. "*Ad Sinarum Gentem*," https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_07101954_ad-sinarum-gentem.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Pope Pius XII. 1958. "*Ad Apostolorum Principis*," https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061958_ad-apostolorum-principis.html. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Potter, Pitman B. 2003. "Belief in control: regulation of religion in China." *The China Quarterly* **174**, 317–337.

Reny, Marie-Eve. 2018. *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scott, James C. 1990. *Dominance and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shen, Joseph Bin. 2022. "Shenru tuijin woguo Tianzhujiao Zhongguohua shi women de shensheng shiming" (It is our holy mission to promote the Sinicization of our country's Catholicism). *Catholic Church in China* **1**, 4–5.

Small, Mario Luis. 2009. "'How many cases do I need?' On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research." *Ethnography* **10**(1), 5–38.

Spadaro, SJ, Antonio. 2023. "A bridge to walk: an interview with Msgr. Stephen Chow, Bishop of Hong Kong." *La Civiltà Cattolica*, https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/a-bridge-to-walk-an-interview-with-msgr-stephen-chow-bishop-of-hong-kong/. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Spires, Anthony J. 2011. "Contingent symbiosis and civil society in an authoritarian state: understanding the survival of China's grassroots NGOs." *American Journal of Sociology* **117**(1), 1–45.

Stanley, Brian. 2007. "Inculturation: historical background, theological foundations and contemporary questions." *Transformation* **24**(1), 21–27.

Ticozzi, Sergio. 2017. "Xi Jinping's meaning of 'Sinicization of religions'." *Tripod* **184**, 99–105.

Vala, Carsten T. 2018 *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God above Party?* Abingdon: Routledge.

Vermander, Benoît. 2022. "Book review: *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, edited by Richard Madsen." *The China Quarterly* **249**, 300–01.

Wang, Huaimao. 2021. "Yi Zhongguohua mubiao dingwei, tuijin sixiang he xinyang jianshe" (Anchoring on the objective of Sinicization, promoting the construction of thoughts and faith). *Catholic Church in China* **6**, 24–26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wang, Zuoan. 2017. "Zai Zhongguo Tianzhujiao dijiuci quanguo daibiao huiyi kaimoshi shang de jianghua" (The speech given at the opening ceremony of the Ninth National Assembly of the Catholic Church in China). *Catholic Church in China* **1**, 6–8.

Xinyou Film and Television. 2021. "Tianzhujiao Sanyuan jiaoqu juban xiying dangjian bainian huadan shuhua zhan huodong" (The Diocese of Sanyuan joyfully organizes calligraphy and painting exhibition to celebrate the centenary of the Party's founding). *Catholic Church in China*, 30 June, https://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/report/21060927-1.htm. Accessed 21 March 2024.

Yang, Felipe. 2024. *Liyi bendihua: cong liyi de xundao yuanze yuji qi jingshen tantao dangjin de Zhongguo jiaohui liyi bendihua* (*Inculturation of Liturgy: Exploring the Inculturation of the Church's Liturgy in Contemporary China from the Principles and Spirit of the Teaching on Liturgy*). Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre.

Yang, Fenggang. 2011. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yang, Fenggang. 2021. "Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural assimilation vs. political domestication of Christianity in China and beyond." In Richard Madsen (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*. Leiden: Brill, 16–43.

Yeh, Alice. 2023. "Social mobility, migratory vocations, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association." *China Perspectives* **133**, 31–40.

Ying, Fuk Tsang. 2019. *Christianity and Chinese Religious Order in the New Era*. Hong Kong: V.W. Link.

Zhuo, Xinping. 2019. "Jianchi Jidujiao Zhongguohua de xianshi biyaoxing" (The realistic necessity of insisting on the Sinicization of Christianity). *China Religion* **10**, 21–23.

Zimmer, Christoph. 2022. "Disrupted loyalties: 21st-century Sinicization of the Catholic Other." In Mark Juergensmeyer, Kathleen Moore and Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Religious Othering*. London: Routledge, 147–163.

Zong, Ai. 2017. "Jianchi Zhongguohua jiushi jiaohui jiankang fazhan de fangxiang: zhuanfang Ma Yinglin zhujiao" (Insisting that Sinicization is the direction for the Church's healthy development: an interview with Bishop Ma Yinglin). *Catholic Church in China* **5**, 27–31.

Appendix

Table 1. List of interviewees

Interview Number	Gender	Status*	Origin**	Pseudonym	Strategy Adopted
1	M	L	HK		Rejection
2	M	R	HK		Rejection
3	M	C	HK		Rejection
4	M	C	HK		Rejection
5	M	C	HK		Rejection
6	F	L	HK		Evasion
7	F	R	M	Sister Lin	Evasion
8	M	C	O	Rev. Andre	Rejection
9	M	C	M		Rejection
10	M	C	HK	Rev. Chau	Rejection
11	M	C	HK		Rejection
12	M	C	O		Evasion
13	M	C	HK	Rev. Zhao	Rejection
14	M	C	HK		Rejection
15	M	C	HK	Rev. Pak	Rejection
16	M	C	HK		Rejection
17	M	C	M		Rejection
18	M	C	HK	Rev. Chiu	Rejection

(*Continued*)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. (*Continued.*)

Interview Number	Gender	Status*	Origin**	Pseudonym	Strategy Adopted
19	M	L	HK		Rejection
20	M	L	HK		Evasion
21	M	L	HK	Andrew	Rejection
22	M	C	HK	Rev. Leung	Rejection
23	F	L	HK		Rejection
24	F	L	M	Barbara	Rejection
25	M	C	M	Rev. Tian	Empathy
26	M	C	M		Rejection
27	M	L	HK		Rejection
28	F	L	HK		Evasion
29	M	C	M		Rejection
30	M	C	M		Rejection
31	F	L	HK		Rejection
32	M	C	M		Evasion
33	M	C	M	Rev. Hao	Empathy
34	F	L	HK		Rejection
35	M	C	M		Rejection
36	M	C	M		Rejection
37	M	C	M	Rev. Ma	Rejection
38	M	C	M		Evasion
39	M	C	M		Rejection
40	M	C	M	Rev. Zeng	Rejection
41	M	C	M		Rejection
42	F	L	HK		Rejection
43	M	C	M		Evasion
44	F	L	HK		Rejection
45	M	C	M		Rejection
46	F	R	HK		Evasion
47	M	C	M	Rev. Tan	Evasion
48	M	L	M		Rejection
49	F	L	M		Rejection
50	M	L	M		Rejection

Notes: * C refers to clerics, L refers to lay people, and R refers to religious brothers or sisters; ** HK refers to Hong Kong, M refers to mainland China, and O refers to overseas.

Chit Wai John MOK is a research assistant professor at the department of applied social sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He received his PhD from the department of sociology at the University of California, Irvine. His research interests include sociology of culture, cognitive sociology, religion, Catholicism and film production.

Cite this article: Mok CWJ (2025). (En)countering State-led Sinicization: Critical Discursive Responses from Roman Catholics in China. *The China Quarterly* **261**, 162–182. https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574102400078X Published online by Cambridge University Press