

2012

# Changing Church-state Relations in Contemporary China: The Case of the Fengxiang Diocese

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This document is the authors' final version of the published article.

Link to published article: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2753/CSA2162-0555450204>

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## Citation

Chan, Shun-hing. "Changing Church-state Relations in Contemporary China: The Case of the Fengxiang Diocese." *Chinese Sociological Review* 45.2 (2012): 65-77.

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## **Changing Church–State Relations in Contemporary China: The Case of the Fengxiang Diocese**

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*Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of church–state relations in contemporary China by analyzing the case of the Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang in Shaanxi province. The article seeks to identify the salient patterns of church–state relations in the Fengxiang diocese and the social factors that contribute to the formation of such patterns. I argue that the three key factors contributing to church–state relations in Fengxiang are the absence of competition between the open and the underground church, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of the government. The absence of competition enables the priests to concentrate their power on countering the government control. The priests embrace papal leadership and resist the establishment of the Chinese Catholic patriotic association in the diocese. The government officials negotiate with the priests and offer them legal status. The church–state model presented by the Diocese of Fengxiang can be called “cooperative resistance.” The resistance of the priests helps to preserve the autonomy of the church and to maintain a limited degree of religious freedom in the diocese.*

On September 8, 2005, the Vatican announced that Pope Benedict XVI had invited four bishops from mainland China to take part in the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops, which was set to take place in October of that year at the Vatican. One of the four bishops was Bishop Luke Li Jingfeng 李鏡峰 of the Diocese of Fengxiang 鳳翔教區, Shaanxi province, located in northwestern China. However, the four bishops could not go to Rome because the Chinese government refused them permission to leave China. Bishop Li wrote a letter in Latin and sent it to the General Assembly of the Synod, expressing his regret for not being able to attend the Synod deliberations. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Secretary of State of the

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This article is based on a research project entitled “Changing Church and State Relations in Contemporary China: A Case Study of the Catholic Church.” The project was funded by the Research Grants Council of the Universities Grants Committee, Hong Kong (ref. HKBU 2430/06H). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2010 Annual Conference of the Hong Kong Sociological Association. The author thanks Anthony S.K. Lam and Mary Julia Child for their helpful critiques of the earlier draft but claims full responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented herein.

Vatican, read the letter to the Assembly.<sup>1</sup> Bishop Li's reputation in the Catholic church in China is illuminating and became an important factor shaping the direction of the church's development in Fengxiang.

Most importantly, the history of Fengxiang diocese is closely related to the underground church movement in China over the past thirty years. After the Cultural Revolution, Cardinal Fan Xueyan 范學俺 of Baoding diocese in Hebei province sought the advice of Bishop Zhou Weidao 周維道 of Fengxiang diocese on the secretive ordination of young priests to become bishops at that politically difficult time in China. Finally, they agreed in 1981 to secretly ordain three bishops: Casimir Wang Milu 王彌祿 of Tianshui 天水 in Gansu province, Julius Jia Zhiguo 賈治國 of Zhengding 正定, and Francis Xavier Zhou Shangfu 周善夫 of Yixian 易縣 in Hebei province. The underground church movement soon developed and spread to other provinces, which changed the history of the Catholic Church in China (Politi 2011: 5–6).<sup>2</sup>

This study examines church–state relations in contemporary China by taking the Diocese of Fengxiang as a case study. The research question is: What is the salient pattern of church–state relation in Fengxiang diocese? What social factors contribute to the formation of the pattern of church–state relation? In the following, I provide a historical and contemporary account of the Diocese of Fengxiang and then explain the key factors contributing to the formation of the church–state model in Fengxiang. In conclusion, I explicate the essential characteristics of the Fengxiang model and discuss the implications of this church–state model in advancing religious freedom in Chinese society.

## **Data and Methods**

This is a qualitative research project utilizing fieldwork to collect data, and the research subject is the Catholic Church in Fengxiang, Shaanxi province. The reason for using the qualitative approach is that the study of the Catholic Church in China continues to be a very sensitive issue. Fieldwork allows the researcher to conduct research in the Catholic diocese in a flexible way, meeting and interviewing priests and the laity from the churches. I conducted fieldwork in Fengxiang from December 2007 to January 2008, during which I visited the St. Joseph Cathedral and the Bishop's Office in Fengxiang, the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the city of Baoji 寶雞, and the Franciscan Order in Nanzhihui town 南指揮鎮, and met and interviewed a total of thirteen people. To ensure their safety, I have concealed their

identities and titles in this paper.

The Fengxiang diocese is one of the four dioceses in my ongoing research on the Catholic Church in mainland China. The other three dioceses include the Mindong 閩東 diocese in Fujian province, Wenzhou 溫州 diocese in Zhejiang province, and Cangzhou 滄州 diocese in Hebei province. Geographically, these four dioceses are located in the northwestern, southern, eastern, and northern parts of China, respectively, and the church–state patterns are unique to each one. These dioceses represent four different models of church–state relations in mainland China. It is my intention to show that the four dioceses project a realistic picture of multiple models of church–state relations in contemporary China (Chan 2011; 2012a; 2012b).

### **The History and Recent Development of Fengxiang Diocese**

The history of Fengxiang diocese can be traced back to the Ming dynasty when the Fengxiang prefecture (Fengxiangfu 鳳翔府) was a meeting point for Catholics. In 1710, the Italian Father Antonio Laghi, O.F.M., arrived in Fengxiang and began preaching. During the period 1704–1714, there were 2,000 Catholics, and a Catholic Church was built in the Fengxiang prefecture. In 1931, Bishop Florent Umberto Tessiatore, O.F.M., divided the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Shaanxi into three dioceses, namely, Xian 西安, Tonzhou 同州, and Sanyuan 三原. In 1932, the Zhouzhi 周至 region in the Apostolic Vicariate was further divided into two dioceses, namely, Zhouzhi and Fengxiang. The former was run by the Chinese non-Franciscan priests, and the latter by Chinese Franciscan priests.<sup>3</sup> The Fengxiang diocese was led by Bishop Philip Silvester Wang Taonan 王道南, O.F.M. (1946–1949), and Bishop Anthony Zhou Weidao, O.F.M. (1950–1983). Today, Bishop Lucas Li Jingfeng (1983–) has the leading role in the Fengxiang diocese.

The jurisdiction of Fengxiang consists of six counties and three districts in the city of Baoji, including Fengxiang, Qishan 岐山, Qianyang 千陽, Long 隴, Taibai 太白, and Linyou 麟游 counties, and Chencang 陳倉, Weibin 渭濱, and Jintai 金台 districts. The diocese includes four deaneries and forty churches, one minor seminary, two clinics, and one orphanage. As of 2012, the diocese consists of 20,000 Catholics, two bishops, thirty-eight priests (including eighteen male religious), and sixty female religious belonging to three female congregations (the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and the Little Sisters of Santa Teresa). A Franciscan Order in Fengxiang also works closely with the diocese. Today, the St. Joseph Cathedral and the Bishop's Office are located at 65 West Avenue in Fengxiang county

(Charbonnier 2008: 220–223).<sup>4</sup>

### **The Church–State Relationship in Fengxiang Diocese**

The competition between the open and underground churches, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of the government are three key factors contributing to the church–state relations in mainland China (Chan and Lam 2002). The open and underground churches compete for legitimacy through the recognition of bishops by the Vatican and, by extension, its support of their priests and the Catholic laity. If the conflict between the open and underground churches continues, the tension will consume the energy of the church and weaken the power of the bishop and the priests to withstand the control of the government.

The Vatican has influence over the Catholic Church in China by playing a mediating role. Generally, the Vatican can influence the church directly and indirectly through the following channels: the doctrine of the church and its canon law, the directives and pastoral letters issued by the Vatican regarding the Catholic Church in China, the approval or disapproval of consecrating a bishop, and the open affirmation or denunciation of a bishop.

The Chinese government controls the Catholic Church through the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). However, the central and local governments are flexible regarding the implementation of religious policy. The government officials adopt a pragmatic attitude, and they are willing to negotiate with the priests and to compromise. In the following section, I explain how these three factors contribute to the Fengxiang model of church–state relations.

#### ***The Absence of Competition between the Open and Underground Churches***

One of the essential characteristics of the Fengxiang diocese, as compared with other dioceses in China, is the absence of competition between an open and an underground church. This factor allows the diocese to concentrate its energy and power on resisting government control, rather than competing for legitimacy with another Catholic faction within its jurisdiction.

After the Cultural Revolution, the priests of Fengxiang were released from prison and returned to their churches and homes. Father Li was released early in 1973, but he was sent to work in a coal mine in Tongchuan 銅川. In 1980, Bishop Zhou Weidao

was also released from prison and resumed his work in the diocese. He called Father Li to return to the church and ordained him as coadjutor bishop. The ordination was approved by the Vatican. Later, Bishop Li settled in the village of Jianjia 尖角 in Qishan county and organized the underground church. Thereafter, Bishop Li led the Catholic Church, secretly celebrating mass on Sunday, receiving young men as students into the underground seminary, and ordaining them to the priesthood. His reputation was on the rise in the northwestern part of China during this critical period. In 1987, local government officials persuaded Bishop Li to return to work in the old church on West Avenue in Fengxiang county. He and his students moved to the village of Wayaotou 瓦窯頭 and began the reconstruction of the cathedral and the Bishop's Office. In 1990, Bishop Li and his students returned to the new St. Joseph Cathedral and to the Bishop's Office. After that, however, the local government continuously suppressed the church through its policy of *xuexi* 學習 (literally, study). I shall explain this policy and practice further in the next section.

There were four Catholic religious orders working together with the church in Fengxiang, namely, the Franciscan Order (O.F.M.), the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (F.M.M.), the Sacred Heart of Jesus Convent, and the Little Sisters of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus. Among the four religious orders, the Franciscan Order is unique and noteworthy. Similar to the other Catholic priests mentioned above, the Franciscan priest Hou Bin 侯斌 was released from prison after the Cultural Revolution and returned to Fengxiang in 1979. He assumed the position of Provincial Minister of the Franciscans and helped to reestablish the Franciscan order in the region. During that time, the local government allowed old priests to train young men as their successors in the form of master-apprentice relationships. He seized this opportunity and nurtured three young men to become religious priests.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the number of religious priests have increased steadily. In 1991, the religious priests built their own Franciscan house in the town of Nanzhihui in Fengxiang. Until 2008, there were thirty religious priests in the Franciscan Order. However, up until 2004, the religious priests regularly had to escape arrest by public security officers.

On August 30, 2004, the Fengxiang underground church surfaced and became an open church. Government officials from the province, city, and county attended the ceremony held in the church, announcing the official recognition of Bishop Li whose status previously had been deemed illegal. This also meant that all the priests in the diocese by association enjoyed legal status. Since that time, the priests have been working openly, and their legal status has extended to protect the Franciscan religious priests as well.

Generally, church–state relations in China are affected by the power structure within the Catholic diocese. Competition between the open and underground churches is common, and government officials have to negotiate with the winner of the competition. The absence of competition in Fengxiang diocese can be understood as a function of the power structure in the Catholic Church. There is at least one other example of this lack of competition between Catholic entities in Changzhi diocese 長治教區 in Shanxi province. However, competition and conflict between the open and the underground Catholic Churches is a general phenomenon across China. The reason why there is no such competition in Fengxiang deserves our attention.

That the Fengxiang diocese did not split into an open and an underground church was contingent upon two factors. First, Bishop Li was appointed by Bishop Zhou Weidao as his successor, and his consecration was approved by the Vatican. Thus, Bishop Li has religious legitimacy in the Catholic hierarchy. Second, Bishop Li thwarted the establishment of the CCPA by government officials in Fengxiang. A Catholic diocese without a CCPA is rare in China. For these two reasons, Bishop Li was held in high regard in the Diocese of Fengxiang. This is why, when he reached agreement with the government to become an open church, no one challenged his decision or cast doubt on his loyalty to the pope. The Catholic community in Fengxiang thus avoided a split into one open and one underground Catholic Church.

### ***The Mediating Role of the Vatican***

The mediating role played by the Vatican greatly influences the church–state relationship in Fengxiang diocese. The pope’s influence works through the following channels: the Catholic faith and the canon law, papal directives issued to the Catholics in China on particular subjects, and the pope’s open affirmation or denunciation of bishops in China.

In China, the two critical factors shaping church–state relations are the papal leadership and the position of the CCPA. Papal leadership is part of the Catholic faith. On this point, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “This is the sole Church of Christ, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2003a, part one, para. 3). In this, the two key words “one” and “apostolic” affirm the leadership of the pope. *The Code of Canon Law* also explicates the Catholic hierarchy and the leadership of the pope in it (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2003b, vol. 2, article 331).

Since 1951, the Chinese government has been denying the leadership of the pope over the Catholic Church in China. The CCPA is a government-controlled organization aimed at promoting what is called “the principle of independence” 獨立自主 and encouraging Catholics “to take the management of churches into their own hands” 自辦教會 (again, the slogan being, “the principle of independence”). To put this slogan in a Chinese context, it means that the Catholic Church in China should cut ties with the Vatican and the pope, and elect and appoint bishops without regard to the pope (i.e., self-election and self-consecration 自選自聖).

The Vatican for its part refuses to accept the CCPA as part of the Catholic Church in China. In 1988, Cardinal Josef Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, issued the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China,” which stated that the pope is part of the Catholic faith and Catholics could not accept the CCPA because it denied the leadership of the pope. It also stated that those who conducted or accepted consecrations without the approval of the pope would be subject to “*latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See” (Lam 1997: 172–176).

Pope Benedict XVI continued to criticize the CCPA in his 2007 pastoral letter issued to the priests in China, “A careful analysis of the aforementioned painful situation of serious differences, involving the lay faithful and their Pastors, highlights among the various causes the significant part played by entities that have been imposed as the principal determinants of the life of the Catholic community” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2007, para. 7).

Regarding papal leadership, Bishop Li conveyed a clear message to the government that he firmly upheld the Catholic hierarchy. At the 2004 ceremony celebrating the change of status from underground to open church, he delivered a speech in front of the government officials, in which he stated his position:

I have decided to observe the commandments of our Lord, to uphold the truths stated in the creeds, to faithfully preach the Gospel, and to build the body of Christ—the church. I shall maintain reconciliation with the Pope of Rome, the successor of Peter, in doctrines and teachings, be faithful to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, will remain a part of the universal church, and will uphold the integrity of our faith. (*The Past and Present of the Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang* 2005: 190–191)

By pronouncing that he espoused the Catholic hierarchy and papal leadership, Bishop Li expressed his political position, that is, his opposition to the government's principle of independence and self-election and self-consecration. Interviewee 3 told me that in 2000, the government officials of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau asked Bishop Li to take part in a bishop consecration ceremony. Bishop Li declined the officials' invitation because they could not present a Pontifical Mandate, which can only be issued by the pope.

The arrival of the CCPA presented another challenge for the church-state relationship in Fengxiang. In the summer of 2001, government officials in the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau opened an office in the Fengxiang diocese with the intention of persuading the underground priests to register with them and to establish the CCPA in the region. This effort failed because the priests refused to cooperate with the government officials. In 2008, when I conducted my field research there was no CCPA in Fengxiang. Interviewee 2 proudly told me that there were only two Catholic dioceses in all of China without a CCPA, one of which was the Fengxiang diocese and the other was the Xinjiang diocese in China's far west.

Pope Benedict XVI commended Bishop Li for his contribution in the northwestern part of China and openly praised him for his faithfulness and loyalty. As discussed at the start, on September 8, 2005, the Pope invited four bishops from mainland China to take part in the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops to take place in October of that year. Bishop Li was one of them. On September 10, 2005, the Xinhua News Agency issued a criticism to the Vatican. Alluding to "a person-in-charge of the Catholic Church in China," the news agency stated, "the pope's invitation expresses disrespect to the five million Catholics in China and contempt of the autonomy of the China church, the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China and the CCPA" (see "Church Bodies 'Regret' Vatican Invited Four Bishops Individually" 2005). Bishop Li was not able to attend the General Assembly because of the government's refusal to allow him to leave China. The incident demonstrates that although the normalization of the Sino-Vatican relation has not yet resumed, the Vatican maintains channels for influencing the Catholic Church in China.

### ***The Pragmatism of the Government***

In my interviews, informants generally agreed that Bishop Li was able to deal with

government officials, even gaining respect from them. Nevertheless, the control of the local government on the church has never loosened a bit.

From 1980 to 2004, when the Fengxiang diocese was still an underground church, the local government attempted to ban the church. An often-employed method, as mentioned earlier, was *xuexi*. The local government required the priests to take part in the classes. These classes, organized by the Religious Affairs Bureau, or the United Front Work Department, and sometimes both, were aimed at educating the priests with regard to the religious question, religious policy, laws, and rules. Generally, there were lectures in the morning and discussion sessions in the afternoon. In 1999, the United Front Work Department, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Public Security jointly organized a large study session at the Party School in Fengxiang, in which all the bishops, priests, and students were required to take part. After the classes, they were dismissed and asked to go back home. However, the bishop, priests, and students quietly returned to the church and continued their works and service in the diocese.

There were two kinds of study sessions, namely, closed study (*fengbi xuexi* 封閉學習) and travel study (*canguan xuexi* 參觀學習). In 2001, the local government raided the church, arrested the bishop, priests, and lay Catholics, and required them to take part in closed study. The nature of the closed study was similar to house confinement. The government officials kept the priests and the lay Catholics in the guest house where they were made to study the rules of religious management in the morning session and to discuss questions in the afternoon session. During that time, Bishop Li and his secretary were brought to an unknown guest house, where they were allowed to lead their lives as usual, to celebrate mass, and to recite the Bible. There were times when Bishop Li was spotted by lay Catholics during his lunch or dinner, after which the government officials immediately changed his location to another guest house. Bishop Li's family often asked to see and to speak with him in order to ensure his safety. After an arranged meeting with family, the government officials also moved Bishop Li to a new location. In 2001, one closed study session was conducted for as long as 42 days. The local government nevertheless failed to change the attitude of the bishop or the priests.<sup>6</sup>

With regard to travel study, in 1984 government officials arranged for all the priests to travel to Guangzhou. After the trip, the priests were brought to Shanghai to visit Bishop Jin Luxian 金魯賢 of the Shanghai diocese. The government's purpose for this travel study was to provide a platform for the priests to express their political

position. If the priests changed their attitude and were willing to follow the government, they could use the opportunity to profess their loyalty to the government. According to Interviewee 3, Bishop Li deliberately talked about the Catholic hierarchy when he met with Bishop Jin Luxian in Shanghai, implying that he affirmed papal leadership and opposed the principle of independence imposed by the CCPA. This travel study also failed to change the attitude or allegiance of the bishop and priests in Fengxiang. In 2002, government officials organized another travel study, inviting Bishop Li to visit the Sheshan Catholic Church 佘山天主堂 in Shanghai and St. Joseph's Cathedral (East Church) in Beijing. This effort by government officials also failed to change the bishop's mind and loyalties.

Despite the various attempts and methods discussed above, the local government officials had not been able to ban the underground church or to dismiss the priests. Finally, high-ranking government officials from the State Administration for Religious Affairs went to meet face-to-face with Bishop Li in Shaanxi in 2004 and engaged him in a negotiation. The government would recognize him as the bishop of Fengxiang diocese, they suggested, and the underground church could change its status to an open church on the conditions that the priests cooperate with the government in religious affairs, and the priests would not work outside the territory of Fengxiang. Bishop Li and the government officials reached an agreement, allowing the previously illegal underground church to become a legal open church in 2004. During my research, when I asked Interviewee 3 why the government officials had to offer legal status to the underground priests, he replied that it was easier for the government officials to monitor the church in terms of management when the church made itself open. The government officials could call for a meeting anytime and discuss with the priests any matters related to the church. They could also ask the bishop to solve problems arising in the diocese. As such, the government officials could better maintain social stability in Fengxiang.

I also asked Interviewee 3 the following question: "Why did the underground church accept the offer from the government and change its status to an open church?" He replied that, first, the bishop and the priests did not violate the principle of faith when they transitioned from an underground church to an open status. Bishop Li had the Pontifical Mandate from the pope, and he rejected the establishment of the government-condoned CCPA in Fengxiang diocese. Second, all the priests enjoyed legal status and were protected by the law after the underground church became open. The government and public security officials could not harass them as they had done before. Furthermore, the bishop and the priests could hold public office. Bishop Li,

for example, was a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC) in the city of Baoji, and Father Chen Zhentao 陳振濤 was a member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC in Fengxiang county. Third, they could build their church by submitting an application to the local government. The bishop could even extend protection to the religious priests of the Franciscan Order if the latter were suppressed by public security officials.

Bishop Li had his own way of dealing with government officials. As long as matters do not violate the principle of Catholic faith, he was willing to cooperate with them. For those issues in conflict with the Catholic faith, he held onto the principle of faith and resisted the government. In the book *The Past and Present of the Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang* (2005: 186), Bishop Li elaborates on his approach:

For matters that have nothing to do with the Catholic faith, I follow the government's policy and law. If the government forbids something, I certainly don't do it; if something is permitted, I will do it. If the government forbids me to go someplace, I won't go there. I don't join any activity that the government does not allow. If the government does not allow me to organize an activity, I certainly follow my principles. I never agree overtly, but oppose in secret.

Bishop Li stressed that he had been cooperative with the government, and he cited the following examples in his article of August 29, 1997, "Regarding My Status as a Catholic Bishop" (*The Past and Present of the Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang* 2005: 186–187). When the government did not allow him to take part in the consecration ceremony of Father Yang Guangyan 楊廣彥 in December 1995, he declined to go. When, in May 1997, the government told him not to join a pilgrimage to the Mount of the Holy Cross in the diocese of Zhouzhi 周至教區, he stayed behind. When the government asked him not to attend the funeral service of Father Zhang Gangyi 張剛毅 on March 20, 1997, he did not attend. The government officials offered the following comments on Bishop Li: "He is a frank, devout, learned, and independent person, and he cooperates well with the government." According to Interviewee 5, the government officials told him that the Fengxiang diocese was one of the few "model" dioceses in China. This indicates that Bishop Li and the Fengxiang diocese have a good reputation for cooperation within the central government and among the government officials. Nevertheless, Bishop Li does not compromise on matters that would violate his Catholic faith, such as papal leadership and the status and role of the CCPA.

I personally experienced the tension between Bishop Li and the government officials during my fieldtrip to the Fengxiang diocese in 2008. Bishop Li called for a diocesan conference on January 2, asking all the priests to return to the Bishop's Office and give a report on each parish. When the government officials heard this announcement, they thought that Bishop Li was planning to ordain priests. They then required the bishop to attend a meeting far away from the church on January 1 and sent a government official to attend the diocesan conference on January 2. They returned Bishop Li to the church only after the diocesan conference had ended. This demonstrates that although Bishop Li had been cooperative with the government, the government officials never loosened their control over the priests. Interviewee 6 gave a vivid description of the relationship between the government officials and the priests during my interview. He recalled that a government official once said, "I have two set of faces in my pocket. Which face I use depends on the situation." The interviewee criticized those government officials who pretended to befriend the priests when they met them but presented a different face as soon as the priests asked the government to return to them their church property. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the priests of Fengxiang diocese have been asking the government officials to return to the church a plot of land that had been confiscated by the government. In March 2009, Father Francis Gao Jianli 高建立, a priest in the city of Baoji, was beaten up inside the mayor's office where he had been asked to visit to discuss issues related to some disputed church property (see "Chinese Priest Beaten amid Dispute over Seized Land" 2009). The priests regularly encounter control by government officials and must deal with them wisely in order to protect the rights of the church.

## **Conclusion**

This case study concludes that the priests of Fengxiang diocese have been upholding their faith, resisting government control, and seeking religious freedom over the past thirty years. I argue that the three key factors contributing to the relatively cooperative church-state relationship in Fengxiang diocese have been the absence of competition between open and underground churches, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of the government. The absence of competition enables the priests to concentrate their energies and power on resisting government control. The priests embrace papal leadership and reject the establishment of the CCPA in the diocese. The Vatican, in return, openly affirms their faithfulness and loyalty. The government officials negotiate with the priests and are willing to compromise. The church-state model of Fengxiang diocese can be called "cooperative resistance," meaning that the priests cooperate with the government with regard to those matters that do not violate

their Catholic faith but resist the control of the government in matters concerning the rights of the church. The resistance of the priests helps to preserve the autonomy of the church, which is instrumental in persuading government officials to compromise in their negotiations with the church.

The case of Fengxiang diocese may help to shed light on the biases in academic studies and other discussions of church–state relations, which overlook the possibilities for a more flexible and compromising relationship. It may also offer researchers some new ideas about the prospects for improving religious freedom in China.

In the academic literature on this subject, some researchers rely on the religious policy documents, analyzing the behavior of the government or church–state relations described therein (Potter 2003; Ying 2003). These studies are biased and limited because the documents on religious policies reflect only what is stated on paper for the official record. They do not suggest or capture government officials’ motivations for implementing certain religious policies or their actual behavior when doing so. Most importantly, the government is always presumed to be inflexible and all-powerful. There is typically no conception that flexibility could be part of the negotiation process. In the case of the Fengxiang diocese, however, government officials negotiated with the underground priests, allowing them to obtain legal status and to bring the underground church out into the open. This is a good example of government flexibility. The government officials were social actors who calculated their potential gains and losses in the negotiation and were ready to compromise in order to gain what they wanted; this behavior, I would argue, is the key to changing the church–state relationship in contemporary China.

The circumventive behavior of resistance by the priests also deeply affects the power structure in the Diocese of Fengxiang. This case study shows that the priests chose effective means to resist government control in their daily lives. When the priests could not openly protest against the unjust system, they found circumventive ways to deal with the government officials. They did this, for example, in the years before 2004, when they persevered in their works and services even after the government dismissed the priests and attempted to ban the underground church. The government officials understood that they could never outright ban the church. The very existence of the underground church, however, was a threat to the government. In negotiating with the priests and offering them legal status in exchange for their cooperation, the government officials could better monitor the church and at the same

time solve the problem of instability. For their part, the priests conditioned their cooperation upon certain principles: They refused to follow the government on matters that threatened to violate their Catholic faith. As such, the priests were able to preserve the autonomy of the church and expand their space for religious freedom. In the future, researchers should focus more on the circumventive behavior of resistance in their studies of church–state relations because this type of behavior is an indigenous model of protest in Chinese society (Chan 2009).

Although the resistance of the Fengxiang priests has achieved fruitful results, their religious space and freedom remain fragile and limited. This is because their space and freedom are dependent upon the will of government officials and their selective implementation of policy, rather than upon their rights as underpinned by the law. For example, one of the conditions of the government’s agreement to an open, legal status for the church was that the priests work only within the confines of the Fengxiang diocese jurisdiction and not beyond. Furthermore, the government officials employed unreasonable means to stop Bishop Li from ordaining new priests. These restrictions were aimed at confining the church and curbing its influence in the community. They were clearly in violation of the universal value of human rights, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In the long run, the priests should strive for human rights and the rule of law, which provide a solid foundation for religious freedom. These can only be a genuine protection for religion in a mature environment in which human rights and the rule of law can flourish to become a value and a societal norm.

## Notes

1. The three other invited bishops were Bishop Wei Jingyi 魏景儀 of Qiqihar, Bishop Anthony Li Duan 李篤安 of Xian, and Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai. See “Church Bodies ‘Regret’ Vatican Invited Four Bishops Individually” (2005).
2. Anthony S.K. Lam (1997: 126–127) has a different understanding of the story.
3. See *The Past and Present of the Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang* (2005: 3–6). This book is a collection of essays regarding the Fengxiang diocese. It was published in 2005 but was used internally. Many of the chapters have no authors, and The Pastoral Committee of the Fengxiang Diocese served as both the editor and publisher. It was published in Chinese, and all the translations are mine.
4. The data was collected during my fieldtrip to Fengxiang from December 2007 to January 2008 and was updated in 2012.

5. A religious priest takes public vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience to serve a superior in a religious order and the mission of that religious order. The Franciscans, the Jesuits, and the Dominicans are examples of religious priests.
6. Interviewee 2 told me that the closed study is often a *ritual* without substance. The government officials spent most of their time playing mahjong during the closed study sessions.

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