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APA Citation

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Changing Church–State Relations in Contemporary China: A Case Study of the Cangzhou Diocese

Shun-hing Chan

The Eighth National Congress of Catholic Representatives (NCCR) was scheduled to take place on 7–9 December 2010, in accordance with the dictates of the Chinese government. On 6 December, government officials and police officers went to the Bishop’s Office in Xian County, Hebei Province, intending to escort Bishop Li Liangui 李连贵 of Cangzhou Diocese to the NCCR in Beijing. However, they could not find him. A few weeks earlier, on 20 November, Bishop Li was coerced into taking part in an Episcopal ordination in Chengde 承德, which was arranged by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) but was not approved by the Vatican. It was during this time that Bishop Li “disappeared.” Frustrated by Bishop Li’s disappearance, government officials and police officers rounded up the priests who were working in the bishop’s office, including the vicar general, Father Yang Quanen 杨全恩, and the chancellor, Father Yu Rusong 于汝松, and questioned them about the whereabouts of Bishop Li. Their questioning was to no avail. The priests were given an “ultimatum,” threatening to list Bishop Li as a “wanted person” across the country and to cause trouble for the Bishop’s family, friends, and the diocese. On 7 December, government officials and police officers again entered the Bishop’s Office to question everyone, including the priests, doorkeepers and kitchen staff. Police cars patrolled the area nearby, and the freedom of all personnel in the church was restricted, including the

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nuns who had to show their identity cards to the police officers when they went out.  
In the end, Bishop Li did not attend the three-day NCCR.

On December 15, the priests of Cangzhou Diocese issued an open letter to the government, expressing their “confusion, depression and even anger” over the disappearance of their bishop after he had been forced by government officials to take part in the Episcopal ordination in Chengde. On December 17, Bishop Li returned to the bishop’s office alone. He was then taken by government officials to a “study session” in a guesthouse, where he was ordered to write a letter of repentance for “unauthorized departure from duty” by not attending the NCCR. Government officials also threatened to end his role in the provincial Political Consultative Conference and remove him as bishop of Cangzhou Diocese if he did not repent for his “wrongdoings” and the “negative impact he had caused.”

This incident in Cangzhou Diocese was reported by the media, details of which vividly exposed the complexity of church–state relations in Chinese society. For example, the incident revealed the ways in which the Chinese government controls the Catholic Church and, as a result, the ways in which the priests resist the government’s control. The incident also drew attention to the following issues: What is the status of church–state relations in China today? To what extent does the priests’ resistance safeguard the autonomy of the Catholic Church and the religious freedom of Catholics in China?

This study examines church–state relations in contemporary China, using Cangzhou Diocese as a case study. The research questions are as follows: What is the salient pattern of church–state relations in Cangzhou Diocese? What social factors have contributed to the formation of this pattern of church–state relations? The following sections discuss the perspective of state–religion relations in understanding

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the church–state relations in China, provide both a historical and a contemporary account of Cangzhou Diocese and discuss the key factors contributing to the formation of the church–state model in Cangzhou. The “Conclusion and Discussion” section expatiates the essential characteristics of the Cangzhou model, and discusses the implications of this church–state model in advancing religious freedom in Chinese society.

Understanding the Catholic Church from the Perspective of State–Religion Relations in China

In recent years, the study of the Catholic Church in China has emerged as a prominent area of research. Recent publications include the writings of Richard Madsen, Eriberto Lozada, Paul Mariani, Peter Moody, and Henrietta Harrison. Madsen’s *China’s Catholic: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (1998) investigates the Catholic Church in two regions in North China from the perspective of civil society, examining whether the Catholics there display civility in their religious life. The two regions Madsen studied are Xian County in Hebei and Baodi County in Tianjin, the former of which is also the research subject of this paper. Lozada’s *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village* (2001) examines the religious life of a Hakka Catholic village in Meizhou, Guangdong, focusing on how transnational processes became localized and contributed to the identity formation of Catholics. Mariani’s *Church Militant: Bishop Kung and Catholic Resistance in Communist Shanghai* (2011) probes the history of how the Catholic Church in Shanghai resisted the religious policies of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s. Moody’s “The Catholic Church in China Today: The Limitations of Autonomy and Enculturation” (2013) examines the relationship between the Chinese regime and the Catholic Church in China after the papal letter issued to Chinese bishops, priests and laity in 2007. Finally, Harrison’s *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (2013) investigates the history of a Chinese village that has remained faithful to the Catholic Church since the seventeenth century, drawing direct connections between its history.

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the globalizing church, and the nation.⁸

Many researchers have sought to explore the interaction between the government and religious groups from the perspective of state–religion relations in China.⁹ These studies share a common understanding of the modern Chinese history of religion from the writings of Talal Asad,¹⁰ Peter van der Veer,¹¹ and Prasenjit Duara.¹² The situation and problems that religion faces in China today is rooted in the state’s perception and definition of religion. Such comprehension can be traced back to the Imperial period, from the Republican period to the Communist period. During the Republican period, the government began making new religious policies, which changed the religious landscape of Chinese society. These changes were the result of a series of events that took place during the rise of the modern state in China. With the goal of building a strong state, the Republican government introduced to China modern Western knowledge and technology, including the idea of religion. Christian missionaries and secular intellectuals were two coexisting yet competing forces affecting the Republican government’s perception of religion, which produced the terms zongjiao 宗教 (“religion”) and mixin 迷信 (“superstition”). The term zongjiao, reflecting the Christian missionaries’ understanding of religion, was borrowed from Japan, and it suggests that only those displaying similar characteristics of Christian doctrine and the church could be called a religion. Literally, the term mixin can be translated as “misguided belief,” referring to those religious practices lacking a clear religious doctrine and organization. As a result, most popular religions in local society were denigrated as superstition. With this new definition of religion, the Republican

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¹² Prasenjit Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
government forced Buddhism and Taoism to conform to the model of the Christian church and thus wiped out popular religions. Such understanding and social engineering continues to influence the religious policies of the Communist state, shaping state–religion relations in contemporary China.

Although these researchers shared a common understanding of the modern history of religion in China, their approaches to the study of state and religion are not the same. In my view, three major sets of theoretical framework can be found in recent literature. Their themes and approaches are elaborated as follows.

The first approach examines state–religion relations from the perspective of the secularization theory. In her edited volume *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (2008), Mayfair Mei-hui Yang points out that the modern history of China is a history of the state’s growth and expansion, which she called “étatization.” The state chose the Western model of liberal modernization, and the natural outcome of modernization is secularization. Under the modernization project, many Chinese religious practices and institutions were marginalized. Christopher Marsh borrows the concept from Peter Berger and Vyacheslav Karpov, suggesting that the problem of religion in China should be understood as the process from forced secularization to desecularization. As explained by Marsh, forced secularization refers to “a response to state policies designed to eliminate religion, and those policies were put into place based upon theorizing that combined economic determinism,” whereas desecularization refers to “a process of counter-secularization, through which religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous and/or co-occurring secularizing processes.”

The second approach is the ecological theory. In their work *The Religious Question in Modern China* (2011), Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer provide a detailed explanation of this approach to the study of state and religion in China. This ecological approach is based on an anthropological perspective of religion, which considers religion a part of a total social phenomenon that cannot be fully isolated as a distinct institution. “The religious questions,” or state–religion relations in China, “needed to be apprehended in the macrosocial context of an open system in which all elements are in constant interaction with one another and with their broader social, political, and economic environment.” This interaction of elements contributes to either equilibrium or a change in the system. As they explain, “Under certain

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conditions, a dynamic equilibrium may arise between elements of the system, producing situations of relative stability, whereas in other circumstances, changes in some of the elements may lead to chain reaction, loss of equilibrium, and rapid phase changes.”

The third approach is the institutional theory, which investigates how various actors attempt to implement the modern category of “religion” in China and the consequences of this action within religions and in the state. As explained by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank in their edited volume *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (2009), institutions refer to “rules that constitute community, shaping how individuals see themselves in relation to others and providing a foundation for purposive action,” whereas institutionalization refers to “the process by which situations adapt to institutions.” They criticize two prevalent but deficient models in the study of state and religion in China, namely the “dichotomous framework of antagonism and conflict,” and the “dichotomous framework [that] locates conflict between state and religion in the context of [the] state’s modern hegemonic discourse of nation, science, and development.” The institutional theory is superior to the above two models, they argue, because this framework takes into consideration multiple actors and multiple political processes in the interaction between state and religion, including competition, adaptation, cooperation, and conflict. They hold that in the process of institutionalizing “religion,” both state and religion are mutually constitutive.

The three approaches discussed above are useful conceptual frameworks that may be mutually corrective and employed to study church–state relations in contemporary China. For example, the institutional framework can be used to examine the secularization theory, which suggests that different religious actors have divergent responses to state policies; some resist, while others adapt and even cooperate with the government. To use the term “desecularization” in describing the behavior of religious actors as “counter-secularization” is one-sided, as it does not grasp the entire religious landscape in China.

The ecological theory reflects the assumption of functionalism, which is underpinned by a set of highly abstract conceptual constructs, but how the elements should be operationalized in empirical study and should contribute to equilibrium or a

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17 Ibid., 3-6.
change in the system is unclear. Furthermore, the idea of equilibrium is controversial. How does one measure equilibrium and draw a conclusion stating that the system is in a state of equilibrium or disequilibrium? The researchers following the secularization theory might state the following criticism: those who have a vested interest in the state may consider the system to be in a state of equilibrium, but those who are inflicted by the modernization project may consider the system one of oppression. On the other hand, the researchers following the institutional theory might make the following remark regarding the ecological theory: the strength of the elements in the system is not equal. The state has an overarching power over religion and society, so researchers should focus on the state’s initiative in the institutionalization of religion, and the institutional effect on the state and religion.

The researchers following the institutional theory have rightly pointed out that different religious practitioners might have divergent responses to state policies. However, recent literature seems to have shown a major pattern wherein certain categories of religion have a corresponding response to state policies. For example, Christian and Islamic groups are inclined to resist, Buddhist and Taoist groups are inclined to cooperate, and popular religion groups are inclined to adapt. Criticism of the “dichotomous framework of antagonism and conflict” may overlook these patterns, in which antagonism and conflict may reflect the genuine state–religion relations of certain religious groups in China.

**Data and Methods**

This is a qualitative research project utilizing fieldwork to collect data, and the research subject is the Catholic Church in Cangzhou, Hebei 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, by meeting and interviewing priests and laity from various churches. The fieldwork was conducted in Cangzhou from February to March 2007, during which time the parishes in Xian County 獻縣 were visited, including the cities of Hejian 河間, Renqiu 任丘 and Botou 泊頭. Medical and social organizations visited included clinics in the town of Leshou 樂壽, the village of Daguzhuang 大郭庄 and the city of Renqiu; the handicapped children’s hospital in the village of Yilunbao 議論堡; the home for the elderly in the village of Xiliuzhuang 西留庄 in the city of Hejian; and a kindergarten in the village of Zhangzhuangzi 張庄子 in the city of Botou. I met and interviewed sixteen people, including Catholic priests and laity in both the open church and the underground
church. The different perspectives of the priests and laity in both churches on certain events and issues were useful in confirming the information gathered and in understanding the complexity of the related issues. To ensure their safety, their identities and titles have been concealed.

Cangzhou Diocese is one of the four dioceses in my ongoing research on the Catholic Church in mainland China. The other three dioceses are Mindong Diocese in Fujian Province, Wenzhou Diocese in Zhejiang Province, and Fengxiang Diocese in Shaanxi Province. Geographically, these four dioceses are located in the northern, southern, eastern and northwestern 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. The intention of the ongoing research is to show that the four dioceses together project a realistic picture of the multiple models of church–state relations in contemporary China.18

**The History and Recent Development of Cangzhou Diocese**

Cangzhou Diocese 滄州教區, which is located in the eastern part of Hebei Province, was formerly called Xianxian Diocese 献縣教區. The history of Xianxian Diocese can be traced back to 1856. During that time, the Vatican divided Zhili 直隸 (i.e., Hebei today) into three different regions, namely the Apostolic Vicariate of Southeastern Zhili (Zhili dongnan daimuqu 直隸東南代牧區), the Apostolic Vicariate of Southwestern Zhili (Zhili xinan daimuqu 直隸西南代牧區), and the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Zhili (Zhili Beijing daimuqu 直隸北境代牧區). The Vatican appointed French Jesuits to administer the Apostolic Vicariate of Southeastern Zhili, and in 1924, it was renamed the Apostolic Vicariate of Xianxian. From 1929 to 1939, the Vatican established one apostolic vicariate – the Apostolic Vicariate of Yongnian 永年 in 1929 – and two apostolic prefectures - the Apostolic Prefecture of Daming 大名 in 1936 and the Apostolic Prefecture of Jingxian 景縣 in 1939 – transferring territory from the Apostolic Vicariate of Xianxian. In 1946, the Apostolic Vicariate of Xianxian was elevated to Xianxian Diocese. In 1981, Xianxian Diocese was renamed Cangzhou Diocese in line with the new administrative regions implemented by the Chinese government.19

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19 Liu Xiantang, ed., *Xianxian jiaoqu jianshi: qingzhu jiaoqu chengli 150 zhounian* [A Short History of
The jurisdiction of Cangzhou Diocese consists of four cities - Botou, Hejian, Renqiu and Huanghua – and eight counties - Xian, Yanshan, Wuqiao, Dongguang, Suning, Haixing, Nanpi and the autonomous Mengcun Hui. Both the open church and the underground church exist in Cangzhou Diocese. The open church includes 206 churches, a minor seminary and a convent, 20 clinics, six kindergartens, one home for the elderly, and one handicapped children’s hospital. Ordained in 2000, open church bishop Li Liangui has a pontifical mandate from the pope. As of 2012, the diocese consists of 80,000 baptized Catholics, 110 priests, 260 nuns and 100 seminarians. The Sacred Heart Cathedral and the bishop’s office are located in Dazhangzhuang, Xian County. The underground church bishop Zhang Weizhu was ordained in 1991 and is also recognized by the pope. He presides over a small Catholic community in the village of Fanjiageta, with 1,400 Catholics and about seven priests.

The Church–State Relationship in Cangzhou Diocese

Competition between the open Church and the underground Church, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of the government are three key factors that have contributed to church–state relations in mainland China. The open church and the underground church compete for legitimacy through the recognition of bishops by the Vatican, and, by extension, its support of their priests and Catholic laity. In Cangzhou Diocese, the open church has won the competition and now represents the Catholic Church in the region.

The Vatican’s influence over the Catholic Church in China is represented by its mediating role. Generally, the Vatican can influence the church directly and indirectly through the following channels: the Catholic faith and canon law, papal directives and pastoral letters issued by the Vatican regarding the Catholic Church in China, the pope’s approval or disapproval of consecrating a bishop, and the open affirmation or denunciation of a bishop. In Cangzhou Diocese, bishops from both churches are recognized by the Vatican. However, the open church overshadows the underground

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20 The data was collected during my fieldtrip to Cangzhou from February to March 2007 and was updated in 2012. See also Jean Charbonnier, Guide to the Catholic Church in China 2008 (Singapore: China Catholic Communication, 2008), 90-98.

church because its legal status allows it to organize religious activities openly.

The Chinese government controls the Catholic Church through different departments and through the CCPA. In Cangzhou Diocese, government officials among departments have divergent attitudes regarding the implementation of religious policies. Generally, government officials are pragmatic in handling the “religious problem” in the region. The following sections discuss how these three factors contribute to the Cangzhou model of church–state relations.

**Competition between the Open Church and the Underground Church**

Competition between the open church and the underground church can be traced back to the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, almost all priests were imprisoned by the government. The diocese was in ruins, and Bishop Zhao Zhensheng 赵振声 died in prison in October 1968. After the Cultural Revolution, the priests were released from prison, and they returned to the diocese, restoring religious activities in 1979. According to the available data, there were only twenty-one priests, two seminarians, seventeen nuns, and fifty thousand Catholics left in 1981.²²

Competition between the open church and the underground church began when priests made divergent decisions in rebuilding the church. Father Liu Dinghan 劉定漢 returned to the diocese when he was released from prison in 1979, and he became the diocesan administrator of Canzhou in 1980. In searching for opportunity in the development of the church, Father Liu decided to cooperate with the government and took part in the CCPA. He accepted the government’s arrangement of “self-election and self-consecration” (自選自聖) in 1981 and was ordained as bishop in 1982, which was approved by the Vatican. During his sixteen years of service, he led the elderly fathers in rebuilding the church, nurturing 60 young priests and 179 nuns; repairing more than 100 churches; and establishing clinics, kindergartens, the home for the elderly and the handicapped children’s hospital.²³ He passed away in 2007 and was succeeded by Father Hou Jingwen 侯經文 and Father Li Liangui, respectively.

Another priest, Li Zhenrong 李振榮, chose to organize the church underground. Father Li was released from prison in 1968, and he returned to the village of Bafang in Cangzhou County where he secretly celebrated Mass on Sundays. He was arrested

²³ Ibid.
again by the public security officers in 1977 for illegally organizing religious activities. During his imprisonment, government officials pressed him to take part in the CCPA and to renounce his relationship with the pope. Father Li refused. He was finally released in 1980 and was secretly ordained as bishop in 1983, which was recognized by the pope. He was arrested by the government again for taking part in organizing the underground Chinese Bishops Conference on Mainland China in 1989. He passed away in January 1992, but before he died, he designated Father Zhang Weizhu as his successor to lead the underground church in Cangzhou.24

The priests in the open church and the underground church had their own considerations in choosing their different paths. Cangzhou Diocese is an “old” Catholic diocese in northern China, which has its own historical heritage, such as the tradition of Jesuits, a certain number of priests, a huge Catholic population, many church buildings and a sizable amount of church property. The priests in the open church decided to rebuild the diocese after the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, they had to secure a status legally from the government, which enabled them to manage the church openly, including celebrating Mass, reclaiming church property from the government, building new churches and repairing the seminary. However, obtaining this legal status also meant that they had to take part in the CCPA and follow orders from government officials. Participation in the CCPA was a problem because the Vatican issued directives in the 1960s and the 1980s stating that the priests should not take part in the CCPA. The priests in the open church handled this situation wisely. On the one hand, they secured the legal status of the church by taking part in the CCPA; on the other hand, they explained their reasons for doing so to the Vatican.25 Through these actions, the bishops in the Cangzhou open church were approved by the Vatican, and were supported by the priests and the Catholics in the diocese, despite taking part in the CCPA.

The priests in the underground church expressed their faith and loyalty to the Vatican by not cooperating with the government. They opposed the CCPA and refused to follow orders from government officials. However, they paid a price in choosing this path. Because they do not have a legal status, they have been constantly suppressed by public security officers, and they are not able to properly manage the church. Equally important, they could not persuade the priests and the Catholics in the diocese to reject the open church because its bishops are approved by the Vatican. As a result, the underground church is not able to compete with the open church, so they

25 Interview with interviewee 1, Cangzhou, 24 February 2007.
maintain only a small community of faith in the region.

In 1994, the bishops of the open church and the underground church met to negotiate the possibility of uniting the two hierarchies. During their discussion, Bishop Liu Dinghan of the open church stressed that he was approved by the Vatican and therefore he had religious legitimacy in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Bishop Zhang Weizhu of the underground church criticized him for taking part in the CCPA, violating the principle of the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China” issued by the Vatican in 1998. He suggested that the two hierarchies could be united on the condition that Bishop Liu admitted that he was wrong in taking part in the CCPA and openly apologized to members of the church. Bishop Liu refused, and the meeting between the two bishops was to no avail. Since then, the open church and the underground church have been working separately in the diocese.

The Mediating Role of the Vatican
The mediating role played by the Vatican greatly influences the church–state relationship in Cangzhou Diocese. However, the influence exerted by the Vatican may not go in the direction it wishes.

In China, the two critical factors shaping church–state relations are 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.” In this profession, two key words, “one” and “apostolic,” affirm the pope’s leadership. The Code of Canon Law also explicates the Catholic hierarchy and the leadership of the pope within it.

The CCPA is a by-product of Sino–Vatican confrontation. Since 1951, the Chinese government has denied the leadership of the pope over the Catholic Church in China. The CCPA is a government-controlled organization aimed at promoting “the principle of independence” (duli zizhu 獨立自主) and encouraging Catholics “to take the management of churches into their own hands” (ziban jiaohui 自辦教會). In a Chinese context, these slogans mean that the Catholic Church in China should cut ties with the Vatican and the pope, and it should elect and appoint bishops on its own.

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26 Interview with interviewee 2, Cangzhou, March 7, 2007.
without regard to the pope (i.e., “self-election and self-consecration”).

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 Popes, issued the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China,” which stated that the pope is part of the Catholic faith and Catholics should not accept the CCPA because it denies the leadership of the pope. In addition, those who conduct or accept consecrations without the pope’s approval will be subject to “latae sententiae excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See.”

The priests’ reactions to the matters of papal leadership and the CCPA reflect their faith and political position. Several incidents occurred in Cangzhou Diocese after 2006, namely the Episcopal ordinations in Xuzhou Diocese and Chengde Diocese in 2010 and the NCCR in 2010, which showed that the priests in Cangzhou Diocese insisted on papal leadership and resisted government control through the CCPA. The following sections examine these two Episcopal ordinations to illustrate the mediating role of the Vatican.

In 2006, government officials arranged an Episcopal ordination, which was not approved by the pope, for Father Wang Renlei of Xuzhou Diocese in Jiangsu Province on November 30. On November 29, government officials of the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs of Hebei Province asked Bishop Li Liangui and Bishop Feng Xinmao of Hengshui Diocese to verify church property in Tianjin. When they got into the car, they were forced to participate in the Episcopal ordination. On the morning of November 30, Bishop Li was able to elude officials in the guesthouse, and he escaped.  

In this incident, Bishop Li’s circumventive behavior of resistance is noteworthy. As explained previously, the Vatican does not approve of “self-election and self-consecration” organized by the CCPA. A priest who participates in such ceremonies violates the Catholic faith and canon law. Therefore, the act of either taking part in or avoiding taking part in the ceremony reflects the political position of the priest. Bishop Li chose to “disappear” in order to avoid taking part in the ceremony, showing that he insisted on papal leadership and opposed “self-election and self-consecration.” The act of “disappearing” is in fact a way of displaying

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29 Anthony S.K. Lam, The Catholic Church in Present-Day China through Darkness and Light (Hong Kong: The Holy Spirit Study Centre, 1997), 172-76.
resistance. On December 3, 2006, the Vatican press office issued a statement on the Episcopal ordination in Xuzhou, criticizing that the ordination did not respect the discipline of the Catholic Church, and condemning it as “illicit” and affirming those who resisted the ordination:

It is consoling to see that, despite past and present difficulties, nearly all the bishops, priests, members of religious orders and lay people in China, aware that they make up a living part of the universal church, have maintained a deep communion of faith and life with the Successor of Peter and with all the Catholic communities scattered around the world.31

This affirmation included Bishop Li.

In 2010, government officials arranged another Episcopal ordination, which was also not approved by the Vatican, this time for Father Guo Jincai 郭金才 of Chengde Diocese in Hebei Province on November 20. On the evening of November 11, government officials went to meet with Bishop Li Liangui in the church, and they left together. On the morning of the following day, government officials accompanied Bishop Li to the bishop’s office so he could gather some personal belongings, and they again left together. After some time had passed, the priests in the diocese realized that Bishop Li had gone missing. On November 20, Bishop Li appeared at the Episcopal ordination ceremony, together with seven other bishops. It is believed that government officials placed Bishop Li under home confinement to avoid another “disappearance” and forced him to participate in the ordination ceremony. On November 24, the Vatican press office issued a statement on the Episcopal ordination of Chengde, criticizing Father Guo Jincai for violating the discipline of the Catholic Church by accepting “self-election and self-consecration,” and expressing its understanding to those who were forced to participate in the ceremony. In part, the statement read, “The Holy See is disturbed by reports from mainland China alleging that a number of bishops in communion with the Pope are being forced by government officials to attend an illicit Episcopal ordination in Chengde.”32

The Vatican’s influence on the underground church is easy to see. The underground church bishop’s position of not cooperating with the government is a result of upholding the Catholic faith and canon law. The act of Bishop Li Zhenrong

in designating Father Zhang Weizhu as his successor, and arranging a secretive Episcopal ordination for him was supported by the directive issued by the Vatican in 1978, in which privileges in Episcopal ordination were granted to priests in China.\textsuperscript{33} During the meeting between the bishops of the open church and the underground church in 1994, criticism made by Bishop Zhang Weizhu towards Bishop Liu Dinghan for violating the principles of the Catholic faith was based on the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China” issued by Cardinal Josef Tomko in 1988. The Vatican also made an effort to mediate the conflict between the bishops. In February 1998, the Vatican appointed Bishop Zhang Weizhu as the bishop of Xinxiang Diocese in Henan Province. This appointment was an effort to solve the problem of conflicting authority by delegating to the two bishops jurisdiction over their own diocese.

It is noteworthy that the directives issued by the Vatican aimed at solving problems during a particular period became the source of other problems later. For example, the privileges in Episcopal ordination were approved on the condition that the elderly bishops find a successor of their own, so that those underground priests faithful to the Vatican could survive in a politically difficult time. The “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China” was issued in an effort to ban the CCPA and to stop the co-optation of bishops, priests and lay Catholics by the government. In Cangzhou Diocese, the directive on privileges in Episcopal ordination and the “Eight-Point Directive” became justifications for the ideology and power preservation of the underground church. Furthermore, the conflict between the open church priests and the underground church priests has been consuming the church’s energy since the 1980s. From this angle, the influence of the Vatican on the Catholic Church in China may not go in the direction it wishes. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued a pastoral letter to bishops, priests, and lay Catholics in China, stating that the Vatican withdrew all directives on privileges to the Catholic Church in China.\textsuperscript{34} As a result, the underground church can no longer exercise secret ordinations.

\textbf{The Pragmatism of the Government}

The government uses a variety of means to control both the open church and the underground church. However, the open church has a legal status, whereas the underground church does not. Hence, government officials employ different means to

\textsuperscript{33} Lam, \textit{The Catholic Church in Present-Day China through Darkness and Light}, 124-28, 247-51.
exercise control over the two hierarchies. Generally, the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, the United Front Work Department, and the CCPA are responsible for the open church, and Public Security officers are responsible for the underground church.

Because the open church in Cangzhou Diocese has a legal status, a strong team of priests, and a huge Catholic population, local government officials cannot suppress the priests at will. They often use administrative means to coerce or material interests to lure priests to follow their orders. However, the priests regularly resist these orders using a variety of strategies. The two incidents of Episcopal ordination in Xuzhou and Chengde and the NCCR in 2010 are three illustrative cases of resistance.

The Xuzhou incident is itself a manifestation of church–state relations in contemporary China. Firstly, government officials deceived the two bishops, forcing them to participate in the ordination ceremony in Xuzhou. Government officials know that church property is highly regarded by priests, so they fabricated a story of church property to lure the bishops to get into the car. Such dishonest behavior shows that their orders to the priests are often ineffective. Secondly, Bishop Li Liangui eluded government officials in the guesthouse and avoided participating in the ordination ceremony. His circumventive behavior of resistance deserves attention. In China’s political system, the priests in the open church must follow the orders de jure exerted by government officials of the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, the United Front Work Department, or the CCPA. Because it is difficult for priests to defy government officials openly, they use a kind of circumventive strategy to resist them. The act of “disappearing” by Bishop Li is an example of one such strategy. However, this strategy does not always work. In the Chengde incident, Bishop Li was again coerced by government officials to participate in the ordination ceremony.

The NCCR in 2010 is another case illustrating the government’s control on the church and the priests’ resistance to the government. The eighth NCCR was to be held in Beijing December 7–9, 2010. A few days before the NCCR, government officials went to a number of dioceses and pressured reluctant bishops, including Bishop Li Liangui, to go to Beijing. However, Bishop Li had “disappeared” after the Chengde incident on November 20, 2010. On December 6, dozens of government officials and police officers went to the bishop’s office in Xian County, giving an “ultimatum” to the priests to hand over the bishop. They rounded up the vicar general, the chancellor and two other priests who worked at the bishop’s office and questioned them on the whereabouts of the bishop. On December 7, government officials entered the bishop’s
office to question everybody, but they still could not find the bishop, who failed to
attend the NCCR. The government officials were very unhappy about the
“disappearance” of Bishop Li, so they ordered police cars to patrol the vicinity,
producing an atmosphere of terror in the region.35

On December 15, the priests of Cangzhou Diocese issued an open letter to the
government, criticizing government officials for infringing on the civil rights of the
bishop and interfering with the internal affairs of the church:

When the illicit Episcopal ordination in Chengde took place, whether through
deceit or house arrest, some people forcibly “sent” the bishop of our diocese to
Chengde to attend the ceremony. What sort of act was that? Where is the right of
personal freedom guaranteed by the Constitution?...The ordination of bishops
and priests is basically internal affairs of the church, and is within the sphere of
canon law and the dogma of the church. Why then should the government coerce
people to attend the ceremony?36

Bishop Li returned to the bishop’s office on December 17. Soon after his return,
government officials took Bishop Li to a “study session” in a guesthouse and ordered
him to write a letter of repentance. They threatened to remove him as the bishop of
Cangzhou if he did not repent for his “wrongdoings.” In early 2011, Bishop Li was
dismissed from his post in the Political Consultative Conference of Hebei Province.37

The incident of the NCCR is useful in understanding church–state relations in
Chinese society. Firstly, the fact that government officials had to coerce a number of
bishops to participate in the NCCR shows that many bishops resisted the government.
Bishop Li was one of them. Secondly, Bishop Li did not attend the
government-controlled NCCR, successfully using the strategy of “disappearing” to
elude government officials again. Thirdly, government officials searched the bishop’s
office, ordered police cars to patrol the vicinity and took the bishop to a “study
session,” which reflects the power relations between the church and the state, in
which the government employs coercive means to force the priests to follow their

35 Union of Catholic Asian News, “Authorities Pile Pressure on Catholics in Hebei” and “Church
Personnel Kept under Close Watch.”
36 Priests of Cangzhou Diocese, “Appeal Letter to the Government in Response to the Illicit Episcopal
Ordination in Chengde,” Tripod 31(2011),
37 Union of Catholic Asian News, “China Suspends ‘Open’ Bishop,”
orders. Last, the open letter issued by the priests of Cangzhou Diocese is *de facto* an act of protest. In the Catholic Church in China, this kind of protest behavior is unusual, which may reveal that church–state tensions are on the threshold of change.

In fact, the priests’ circumventive behavior in resisting the control of government officials is part of everyday life in the diocese. For example, priests do not allow government officials to take part in the administrative committee meeting of the diocese, and they report to them only after the meeting. The CCPA in Cangzhou represents a wrestling ring for priests and government officials, where priests actively seek to occupy important seats in the CCPA. Bishop Li himself is the director of the CCPA in Cangzhou. However, government officials prefer finding lay Catholics to serve in the CCPA, where they can threaten them if they do not follow their orders. In such situations, priests ask those lay Catholics to decline the government officials’ request and arrange to have other priests or laity replace them. When priests are able to seize power in the CCPA, they can turn it into an “empty” organization with no function. In one interview, interviewee 3 told me, “In Cangzhou Diocese, we only give a name to the CCPA, but no meetings are held,” and government officials can do nothing about it.

For the underground church, government officials use both suppression and pressure. Public Security officers regularly arrested and imprisoned Bishop Zhang Weizhu. In 1988, public security officers placed Bishop Zhang in a detention house in Hejian for four months. When Bishop Zhang was released, he went to work in Xinxiang Diocese 新鄉教區 in Henan Province. In January 2000, he was arrested again by Public Security officers and was placed under home confinement in a guesthouse in Hejian for about eighteen months. When Bishop Zhang was released, he returned to his home in the village of Fanjiageta, but his personal freedom has been restricted by Public Security officers since his return. During his detention, government officials pressured Bishop Zhang to turn to work in the open church on the condition that he celebrated Mass with the bishop of the open church. Bishop Zhang refused on the grounds that Bishop Li Liangui had violated the principle of the Catholic faith by taking part in the CCPA. Government officials also suggested that he could be recognized by the government as an open church bishop and could work in Xinxiang Diocese on the condition that he followed the CCPA and the Bishops’ Conference of the Catholic Church in China and observed the Three-Self principles and the Religious Affairs Regulations. Bishop Zhang again refused.

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38 Interview with interviewee 3, Cangzhou, March 6, 2007.
39 Interview with interviewee 2, Cangzhou, March 7, 2007.
simply, government officials were not able to co-opt the underground priests into the political system, but they could restrain the development of the underground church.

Although the government’s ideological control of the priests seems tight, their attitude towards the social services and religious activities organized by the Catholic Church in the region has been rather flexible. The following sections discuss these social services and the religious activity of pilgrimage to illustrate the pragmatic attitude of government officials.

The open church provides a variety of social services in Cangzhou, including preschool education, the rehabilitation of handicapped children, medical services and a home for the elderly. Government officials have been ambivalent about these social services provided by the church. On the one hand, the local government needs these social services to solve problems in the region; on the other hand, government officials are afraid that the church will become stronger and more influential in society. Such an ambivalent attitude can be seen in their handling of matters regarding social services. They have affirmed the contributions of the church to the local community and yet have exerted restrictions on these services. However, government officials have been removing these restrictions since the 1990s.

To cite medical services as an example, there are both government-sponsored clinics and clinics provided by the Catholic Church in Cangzhou. Government-sponsored clinics can barely meet the needs of the community, while Catholic clinics not only help solve problems but also have a good reputation in providing reliable and quality service. However, the local government has exerted many restrictions on Catholic clinics. For instance, Catholic clinics are required to purchase their medicine from certain pharmacies, which has increased their operating costs. In addition, patients cannot receive a government subsidy if they consult doctors in the clinics run by the church. Therefore, patients generally choose government clinics over Catholic clinics.40 One Catholic clinic in the city of Renqiu, “Aifuda United Clinic” (Aifuda lianhe zhensuo 愛福達聯合診所), is comparable to a small hospital. This clinic provides services to 400,000 patients each year. Officials from the United Front Work Department have warned the priests who work there that the clinic is not a place for religious activity, and they should not “propagate” religion in the clinic.41 After 2002, the government removed some of these restrictions; for example, Catholic clinics no longer need to purchase medicine from designated

40 Interview with interviewee 4, Cangzhou, 26 February 2007.
41 Interview with interviewee 5, Cangzhou, 28 February 2007.
pharmacies.

The services provided for the elderly is another example. There is a home for the elderly in the village of Xiliuzhuang that takes care of about 50 elderly people. The church spends more than RMB100,000 each year for the expenses of this service. Government officials have affirmed the contribution of the service to the elderly by occasionally giving them a small amount of rice and oil. However, the local government does not provide subsidies to the service, not even to help the elderly get the minimum subsistence security. Even though the government provided little assistance to the church, government officials were happy with the service, which helped solve the problem of elderly people who were neglected or abandoned by their family in the region.

The way public security officers dealt with a Catholic pilgrimage also reflects the pragmatic attitude of government officials. In the city of Hejian, there is a pilgrimage site named Ludezhuang 露德庄. The local government of Hebei Province had forbidden any activity of pilgrimage for three decades prior to 1998, when they finally allowed the activity to commence. Since then, lay Catholics have been voluntarily organizing teams of pilgrims to go to Ludezhuang in May each year. The number of people making the pilgrimage has been on the rise. In 2003, Public Security officers set up checkpoints near the pilgrimage site and blocked cars from proceeding if drivers could not present a document of permission. They claimed the reason for doing this was for the safety of the Catholics. In such situations, the lay Catholics would get out of their cars and walk to the pilgrimage site through the many alleys of the village. After 2004, public security officers did nothing to block the cars, and even more Catholics took part in the activity after public security officers removed these checkpoints. In 2006, the number of Catholics who made the pilgrimage was as high as 30,000.

The information and analyses above show the pragmatic attitude of government officials in handling the matters of the Catholic Church. It is noteworthy that there are many departments in the local government which are responsible for different matters concerning the Catholic Church. For example, the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious

42 Interview with interviewee 6, Cangzhou, 28 February 2007. The minimum subsistence security is a category of social security in China. The amount of subsistence in rural and urban areas in many provinces has been fixed at RMB465 in 2012. Those who want to apply for it need to present his or her identity card and the household register. However, the registered residences (hukou) of many elderly people in the home for the elderly are not in Hebei Province, and they do not have family to help present the household register. The government officials did not assist them on this matter.

43 Interview with interviewee 7, Cangzhou, 1 March 2007.
Affairs welcomes the social services provided by the church. Solving the problems of the local community by using social services results in increased social stability, and the officials concerned gain merits for their good work. Public security officers are now tolerant of the activity of pilgrimage because it is the policy of local government, and from 1998 to 2003, the activity has not caused any incidents that have led to social instability. The United Front Work Department has reservations about both the social services and the pilgrimage because they have the potential to strengthen the influence of the Catholic Church in society. The stronger the church’s influence, the weaker the work of the department appears. From this angle, there is a contradiction among departments, and the local government is not easy to deal with in this dilemma. The resistance of priests will become increasingly progressive, and the attitude of government officials will become more pragmatic. The task of ideological control will be difficult to achieve in the rapidly changing Chinese society.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study concludes that the priests of Cangzhou Diocese have been upholding their faith, resisting government control, and seeking religious freedom over the past thirty years. The three key factors that have contributed to the church–state relationship in Cangzhou Diocese have been the competition between the open church and the underground church, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of the government. Both the open church and the underground church are recognized by the Vatican. However, the open church has the legal status to work in public, through which it won the competition and now represents the Catholic Church in Cangzhou. The Vatican has been exerting influence on the church’s priests through its mediating role, including the Catholic faith and canon law, papal directives issued to the Catholics in China and the pope’s open affirmation and denunciation of bishops in China. The Vatican also mediated the conflict between the open church and the underground church. Government officials have been ambivalent in controlling and tolerating the church. Generally, the government welcomes the social services provided by the church and is tolerant of the activity of pilgrimage, which reflects the pragmatic attitude of government officials. It is with this kind of pragmatism that the Catholic Church is able to expand its space and develop in the local community. The church–state model of Cangzhou Diocese is one of “dependent resistance,” meaning

44 There was discussion within the government, in which some suggested that the activity of pilgrimage should be restored in Hebei Province. See Fu Jinfeng and Jie Cheng, “Guanyu Hebeisheng tianzhujiao dixia shili wenti de diaocha yu sikao” (An Investigation and Analysis of the Underground Church in Hebei Province), in Xia Tao ed., Qianjinzhong de Zhongguo tongyi zhanxian (The United Front in the Advancing China) (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2000), http://big5.xjass.com/mzwh/content/2012-08/14/content_241677.htm, accessed 14 August 2012.
that the open church priests agree to work within the political institutions to secure the legal status of the church while resisting the government’s control, to preserve the autonomy of the church and to advance religious freedom under the institutional constraints of the political system.

Church–state relations in Cangzhou Diocese are useful in understanding state–society relations and the future of religious freedom in mainland China. The case of Cangzhou Diocese shows that the priests’ resistance to the government has been changing, from being obscure to becoming unequivocal. This is a major change of church–state relations in Cangzhou. Working within political institutions, the open church priests must follow orders from government officials. However, they have been using the strategy of circumvention to resist government officials. As government officials know that their orders have been ineffective, they have turned to the use of interests to lure priests to comply with their orders. Such methods of persuasion are often used in the name of “returning church property” or “increasing the allocation of funds” to the diocese.

In the Xuzhou incident, government officials used the “verification of church property” to deceive priests. However, they cannot repeatedly use these same tricks, as the priests have become impervious to their methods. After the Xuzhou incident, church-state tensions became increasingly unequivocal. In the Chengde incident, government officials forced Bishop Li Liangui to attend the ordination ceremony. After the ceremony, Bishop Li “disappeared” a few weeks later to avoid attending the NCCR. As a result of Bishop Li’s acts of resistance, government officials searched the Bishop’s Office and ordered police cars to patrol the vicinity. Such incidents show that government officials control the church by force and violence in their desperation over the ineffectiveness of government orders. The behavior of government officials has resulted in stronger resistance. The priests issued an open letter to the government criticizing the officials for infringing on the civil rights of the bishop, which shows that the priests sought to protect their rights by protesting in public. To this point, the church–state confrontation in Cangzhou Diocese has reached its peak.

Cangzhou Diocese is one of the most important Catholic dioceses in northern China, and the resistance of priests in Cangzhou has produced a spillover effect to the priests in other dioceses. The method of “disappearing” used by Bishop Li Liangui in resisting control of government officials has been widely reported by the media and discussed on the internet by priests of other dioceses. For example, Father Peng Jiandao 彭鑒道 of Handan Diocese 邗鄕教區 in Hebei Province expressed his
admiration for Bishop Li in his blog:

Being a priest of the open church in China and the most faithful leader of the Catholic Church – Bishop Li Liangui – who is highly commended by the Vatican and lay Catholics, is a witness to faith in facing pressure and challenges due to his courage. Bishop Li Liangui upholds the Catholic faith unyieldingly and safeguards the freedom of conscience, despite enormous pressure. This is the way and model of a pastor!45

In 2010, the Chinese-language service Union of Catholic Asian News held an election for the “Chinese Catholic Person 2010,” and Bishop Li Liangui was voted “Person of the Year” by its readers. Union of Catholic Asian News made the following remarks introducing Bishop Li: “Many voters agreed that Bishop Li is a good role model for Chinese Catholics, especially to other bishops, and is a pillar of the Catholic Church in China.”46 The resistant behavior of Bishop Li has been changing the way of thinking among Catholic priests in China. However, only those who possess conditions and resources comparable to Cangzhou Diocese are able to resist the government.

The circumventive behavior of resistance employed by the priests in Cangzhou Diocese deserves further discussion. In this politically difficult time, priests cannot defy the government outright. What they can do is use the method of circumvention. In the short term, such behavior may yield fruitful results. However, the religious space and freedom of the priests remains fragile and is limited because such space and freedom are dependent upon the will of government officials, rather than upon the rights underpinned by the law. If government officials refuse to tolerate the church, the priests’ situation will become difficult. The government officials who exercised their coercion in forcing Bishop Li to attend the ordination ceremony in Chengde provides an illustrative example. The Chengde incident also shows that government officials are indifferent to the rights of Chinese citizens who enjoy religious freedom stipulated by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which China is one of the parties who signed the document on 5 October 1998. In the long term, the priests should strive for human rights and the rule of law, which provide a solid foundation for religious freedom. The open letter issued by the priests of Cangzhou protesting the government has been an important step forward. Only in a mature

environment in which human rights and the rule of law can flourish to become a value and a societal norm can religious freedom be a genuine protection for the church, the priests and the Catholics in China.

The case of Cangzhou Diocese is useful in reflecting on the approaches to the study of state and religion in China. This study confirms some of the central theses formulated by the secularization model, such as the Chinese government’s introduction of a multitude of policies and measures to coerce the Catholic Church into achieving the goals set by the state. However, this approach cannot explain the inconsistent behavior of government officials in implementing state policies, as well as their pragmatic attitude in their interaction with the clergy. Likewise, the ecological theory does not fully explain church–state relations in Cangzhou Diocese: do they reflect a state of equilibrium in the system? Because of the ambiguity of concepts, the ecological theory has not been proven.

The institutional approach is useful in explaining church–state relations in Cangzhou Diocese. First, the influence of state policies on the Catholic Church is obvious, and the state’s power can be seen in its coercion of the church to cut ties with the Vatican, in forming the state-sponsored Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association to control the church, and in forcing the clergy to comply with state policies. Both the open and the underground clergy have chosen to resist the government’s control. What is noteworthy is that the strategy of the open church in defying the state is in fact a kind of “dependent resistance.” This reminds one that cooperation and resistance can be complementary in the dynamic relations of state and religion.

Second, there are multiple actors in the church–state pattern of Cangzhou Diocese. In the state, the officials of the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs and public security were willing to negotiate with the clergy and to make concessions, but the officials of the United Front Work Department were rigorous in coercing the clergy to comply with state policies. Both the open and the underground clergy have chosen to resist the state, but they also competed with each other for legitimacy in the Catholic hierarchy that represents the Catholic Church in Cangzhou. The Vatican is a transnational actor, shaping the interaction between the state and the church in a circumventive way.

Finally, the institutional effect on Cangzhou Diocese can be identified in the pattern of interaction between government officials and the clergy. For example, a legal status for the Catholic Church in the political institutions of China is paramount,
because it determines the power relations between government officials and the clergy. After the Cultural Revolution, some priests were willing to cooperate with the government so they could obtain a legal status for their church to run it openly. Other priests refused to work with the government, and as a result they could only manage their church illegally underground. The position the priests chose regarding political institutions matters. The local government cannot arbitrarily suppress the open church clergy because they are protected by the law. The open church clergy can even openly criticize government officials for infringing on human rights if they cross that line. However, government officials can suppress the underground clergy at will because the clergy do not have a legal status. The social services provision of the Catholic Church is also an illuminating case in point. The open church runs a variety of social services in local society. Government officials know that these services help solve social problems and maintain social stability, so they display a tolerant and pragmatic attitude towards the open clergy. The position and choices of the actors in the state and in religion regarding political institutions tremendously affects their interaction pattern, which will continue to shape church–state relations in contemporary China in the future.