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FROM *MAXIMUM ILLUD* TO THE FIRST NATIONAL SYNOD *PRIMUM CONCILIUM SINENSES*

Franz Gassner*

ABSTRACT

The Synod is as old as the Church itself. The concept originates from Greek *σύνοδος*, literally, “coming together,” “joint way”, “assembly”, “concourse”. Following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is the proper forum to address major challenges in the church, e.g., the admission of Gentiles (Jerusalem 50 AD), the nature of Jesus Christ (Nicaea 325 AD), or the role of Mother Mary in the history of Salvation (Ephesus 431 AD). For the whole of China, as late as 1924 a First National Synod was convened to deliberate and decide on major issues of inculturation of faith and the sinicization of the universal Church in China. It was convened by the Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini in Shanghai 1924, and was a response to Pope Benedict XV’s urgent mission directive *Maximum Illud* (1919) during a time of dramatic and historical transitions in China.¹

Keywords: Celso Costantini; Christianity in China; Colonialism; Inculturation; *Maximum Illud*; Mission and Politics; Sinicization; Synod of Shanghai

* I express gratitude to Prof. Leo Leeb for his inspiration and encouragement to write this article and for his permission to use his English translations from Latin of selected Articles of the Synod of Shanghai 1924.

THE LONG AND BUMPY ROAD TOWARDS THE SYNOD OF SHANGHAI 1924

A first meeting of missionaries dealing with inculturation of faith in the Chinese context was held in Macau in 1600 and between the years 1600 and 1665 around 74 meetings of missionaries and Chinese converts had been organized to address ecclesiastical matters in China.¹ The meeting in 1628 in Jiading near Shanghai forbade the use of ‘Shangdi’ 上帝 as a term for God and opted for the use of ‘Tianzhu’ 天主.² Various missionaries from different congregations who had been united under house arrest held a meeting in Canton from December 1667 to January 1668, at which they discussed matters related to mission methods, sacraments, and ecclesiastical discipline, and they came to agreement on 42 rules.³ A Diocesan Synod was convoked in 1803, in Chongqing 重慶 by Saint Bishop Dufresse 聖徐德新. “Two foreign missionaries and 17 native priests attended the conference, and the Latin reports of the decisions were sent to Rome for approval. This synod counts as one of the most outstanding ecclesiastical events in the early nineteenth century in China.”⁴

A first plan for a plenary Synod of China emerged in 1846 in letters between Procurator Antonio Feliciani 傅安當 and the Propaganda Fidei in Rome. Pope Gregory XVI (1831–1846) and his administration promoted synods as tools “to speed up the new start in the missions, to introduce unified missionary methods, to erase wrong practices, with one word, and to prepare a way for the future.”⁵ The suggested synod title in 1846 for China was *Cina et Regni adjacenti*, which amounted to an “Interregional Council of the Far East” to be convened in Hong Kong.⁶ Although, it was never realized due to mounting and complicated political and inner-ecclesiastical circumstances.⁷ Most probably, history would have turned out differently if it had convened. At that time, Feliciani had already suggested the idea of an Apostolic Nuntius in the person of Ludovico Conte Besi 本主教類思羅, the Apostolic Vicar of Shantung and administrator of Nanking, the reason is indicated in his words “because it is the opinion of all bishops, without council and an Apostolic Nuntius the many malpractices and disagreements under the apostolic vicars and missionaries could not remedied.”⁸ The papal administration expected from such a General Synod “*immensi vantaggi al successivo miglior*

¹ Leo Leeb, “The National Synod of 1924 in Shanghai and the Catholic View of Chinese Culture,” *Verbum SVD* 60, 1–2 (2019): 42–57, here 43.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ Josef Metzler, *Die Synoden in China, Japan und Korea 1570–1931* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1980), 65. Author’s translation.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ See the “Chapter 5: Plan of a National Synod (1848–1850),” in *Ibid.*, 68–76 [in German].

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69. Author’s translation.

andamento, sistemazione piu regolare, progressi ed altro, delle Missioni Cinesi, e Regni adjacenti."⁹

Another important local Synod took place from 7th November 1851 to 3rd December 1851 in Shanghai with eight bishops attending under the guidance of Bishop Maresca 趙方濟主教 (1806–1855).¹⁰ The 12 Plenary Assemblies emphasized the need to erect a regular hierarchy in China and to overcome the outdated lower level systems of Apostolic Vicars. The erection of proper Church provinces would ease the conduct of local and regional meetings. With reference to the positive experiences of establishments of hierarchies in the USA (1808) and Australia (1842), every civil province of China should therefore become a respective Church Province.

Unfortunately, this also was never realized, due to the factor of increasing political colonialist interests and specifically the so-called French Protectorate, under which the China mission was consolidated for more than half a century as an "Ecclesiastical Colony."¹¹

The First Vatican Council was attended by 14 Apostolic Vicars from the 22 bishoprics in China, and some ecclesiastical matters concerning China were discussed there. At this meeting, China had been divided ecclesiastically into 5 administrative regions, with each region to be tasked with organizing a regional synod every 5 years. Subsequently, Region 1 (Zhili, North East China, Mongolia) held synods in 1886, 1892, and 1906. Region 2 (Shandong, Shanxi, Henan, Shaanxi, Gansu) held synods in 1885, 1891, and 1908. Region 3 (Hunan, Hubei, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Jiangnan) held synods in 1887 and 1910. Region 4 (Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Tibet) held synods in 1909, and Region 5 (Guangdong, Guangxi, Hongkong, Fujian) held synods in the years 1880, 1891, and 1909 in Hong Kong.¹²

In general, the nineteenth century saw missionary expansion and innovative developments, but this was accompanied by Eurocentric imbalances and the lack of deeper theological reflections in regard to nature, methods, and directions in the missions. "The striking lack of representation of missionary interest at the First Vatican Council reflected the fact that ecclesiastical circles were caught up in European interests [...]. The real impulse came from outside, especially from the growing and prevailing imperialism and colonialism, in whose wake the missions had recently assumed a truly worldwide scope."¹³ According to church historians,

⁹ Letter of the SCPF to Feliciani of 21st October 1849 [AP Lettere 338, fols. 360v–62r], in *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰ Leeb, "National Synod," 44.

¹¹ Ernest P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China's Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹² Leeb, "National Synod," 44.

¹³ Jakob Baumgartner, "Part Three: The Expansion of Catholic Mission from the Time of Leo XIII until World War II," in *History of the Church*, ed. Hubert Jedin and John Dolan, vol. 10, *The Church in the Industrial Age*, ed. Roger Aubert et al. (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 527.

the concept mission, itself of the Propaganda Fide, was primarily applied to the Near Eastern Churches and to the work among immigrants in the US up until 1908. “The propagation of faith abroad was totally dependent on the colonial power which directly or indirectly dominated the country or the area under its influence. Hence, all colonies conquered by Russia, even those solely populated by non-Christians, were off-limits to Catholic missions, as were the countries of the Ottoman Empire and its successor states.”¹⁴ Jakob Baumgartner affirms this “amalgamation of political power and apostolic activities”¹⁵ during that time, which caused and led to numerous challenges, specifically in the first half of the twentieth century, which can be framed by the Boxer Rebellion around 1900 and finally the political victory and takeover of China by the Communist Party of China in 1949.

In general, missionaries were too close and were un-reflected and entangled in dependency on imperialistic and colonial systems. “Everywhere, the missionaries were incorporated into, or subjugated to the imperialist system. Real freedom of propagation of the faith, barely existed in any of these countries. These facts, which were only discovered until recently and do not mean that the missionaries voluntarily supported the political and economic systems. According to contemporary reports, most missionaries were scarcely aware of the political implications of their work. And even those, who seemed to later generations to have been particularly active in the political arena, simply wanted to demonstrate their patriotism, which was constantly being questioned by the colonial administration.”¹⁶

However, considering the above, there were promising initiatives to counter this situation, for example by indigenizing the clergy, which emerged from the directives of Pope Leo XIII, who insisted in 1893 on the training of native clergy in India due to the fact that native clergy show a “better acquaintance with the country and its people,” which could override the numerical limitations of relying constantly on a very small number of European missionaries, and, finally, “the possibility that the latter could be expelled from the country.”¹⁷ In his Encyclical Letter on Seminaries *Ad extremas Orientis ora* (June 24, 1893), Leo XIII stressed explicitly the issue in the following words:

The preservation of the Christian faith among the Hindus will be precarious and its propagation uncertain as long as there is not a native clergy properly trained for priestly duties, not only to be of assistance to foreign priests, but also to be in rightful charge of the administration of the Christian Church in their cities. Tradition tells us that Frances Xavier maintained this same opinion. They say that he used to assert that the Christian cause in India could never have firm roots without the continuing dedication of a pious and zealous clergy native to India. It is clearly evident that he

¹⁴ Ibid., 531.

¹⁵ Ibid., 531.

¹⁶ Ibid., 531.

¹⁷ Ibid., 532n27.

had a keen understanding of the issue. Certainly, the work of the missionaries coming from Europe is beset with many obstacles. Most especially, indeed, is their unfamiliarity with the vernacular, which is very difficult to learn. There is also the remoteness of institutions and customs which remain unfamiliar even after a long period of time. Hence, the European clergy is forced to live there as in a strange land. Since a foreign clergy, therefore, has difficulty in winning the hearts of the people, it is plain that the work of a native clergy would be far more fruitful. From experience, they know the nature and customs of their people; they know when to speak and when to keep silent. In fine, they live among Hindus as Hindus without causing any suspicion and it is, indeed, difficult to say how important this is especially in times of crisis.”¹⁸

These prophetic words soon became the plain reality with the upheavals of World Wars in the twentieth century. In the case of the mission to China, the unjust treaties of the nineteenth century imposed “by the Western powers marked the beginning of a new era in missionary history. The various agreements paved the way for the mission throughout the entire country and, aside from acceptance and protection, it provided the Church with some financial and social advantages. *Yet such missionary policies proved to be harmful as well.* The missionaries made insufficient effort to fashion the communities with the Chinese spirit and sensitiveness in mind, and many a conversion was inspired by material motives (the so-called rice Christians). In addition, the disciples of a white religion were suspect to the population (e.g., in regard to orphanages) and deeply hated by certain segments, especially the Mandarins and scholars, whose national pride was hurt. The resentments exploded during the Boxer uprising in 1900, an incident which cost the lives of thousands of Catholics and numerous priests.”¹⁹

A papal legate and a national synod would have been the proper means to address the burning issues of the mission in China, but unfortunately, the realization of both these plans were impeded for decades by various factors. In the case of the installation of an official papal legate “French and Portuguese official interventions had blocked it.”²⁰ To strengthen the ecclesiastical structures in China, the establishment of their own nunciature in Beijing had been suggested already in the nineteenth century, “but the plan proposed by the Chinese failed because France opposed it. Neither under Leo XIII, nor under Pius X could the project be realized.”²¹ Even up to the twentieth century, the French government “had regularly blocked efforts to have an official papal legate in Beijing, although it had sometimes been suggested that a purely ‘spiritual’ representative might be tolerable.”²² Finally, in 1911, the Vatican showed guts and “mandated a preparatory commission for a

¹⁸ Pope Leo XIII, “Encyclical Letter on Seminaries for Native Clergy *Ad extremas Orientis ora* (24th June 1893),” no. 4, accessed April 28, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_24061893_ad-extremas.ht ml.

¹⁹ Baumgartner, “Expansion,” 534–35 (emphasis mine).

²⁰ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 226.

²¹ Baumgartner, “Expansion,” 537.

²² Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 224.

national synod. However, the Chinese revolution of 1911 and then the world war got in the way, and the project withered.”²³

In the year 1912, the Catholic church had 1.4 Million members and 724 native clergy and about twice that number of foreign missionaries.²⁴ National and congregational interests had blocked the way to find substantial answers to the questions posed by the missions for too long a time. “The France of the Third Republic was itself anticlerical and only maintained its protectorate over the Chinese missions so as to promote French interests abroad.”²⁵

Strong initiatives of new approaches and methods regarding the missionary method emerged in China itself, aiming at “a thorough indigenization” and turning away from Europeanism, promoted by pioneers like Fr. Vincent Lebbe (雷鳴遠神父 1877–1940). The Tientsin crisis in 1916 “can be described as a catalyst which helped to kick-start and accelerated this whole process of mission reforms.”²⁶ Although Fr. Vincent Lebbe was forced to leave China, this crisis ushered in a serious process of transformation for the mission of China, as the following resume on the visitation by Claude Guilloux concludes: “At the end of his visit and colloquium with some of the principal characters in that crisis on the religious aspect of it, Guilloux arrived at the conclusion that it was up to Rome and Propaganda Fide to resolve the serious issues and difficulties that ensued from the French Protectorate in China, the emancipation of the native clergy and their elevation to the episcopate and the approval or not, of the new method of evangelization favoured by Lebbe and his fellow Tientsin missionaries.”²⁷ Rom spoke and parts of Lebbe’s ideas “were incorporated into the missionary encyclical of Benedict XV, *Maximum illud*.”²⁸

The year 1919 marked the for China devastating Treaty of Versailles, and upon its renewed and grave unjust treatment of China—among other factors—the May 4th Movement was sparked in China, “when 5000 students of Peking University took to the streets to protest against the decision of the Versailles Treaty, ending World War I, which granted the German Concession in Shandong Province to Japan, China’s mortal enemy.”²⁹ This completely misguided treatment of China in Versailles led the Chinese Delegation to leave without signing. Chinese intellectuals realized more and more that China could “not depend on Western

²³ Ibid., 226.

²⁴ Baumgartner, “Expansion,” 535.

²⁵ Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 To 2000*, tr. M.N.L. Couve de Murville (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 388.

²⁶ Valentine Ugochukwo Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV’s Missionary Thinking: Prospects of a Local Church in Mission Territories* (Saarbrücken: Scholar’s Press, 2015), 298–99.

²⁷ Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV’s Missionary Thinking*, 299.

²⁸ Baumgartner, “Expansion,” 537n34.

²⁹ Editorial, “Double Centenaries of May 4th and ‘Maxium Illud,’” *Tripod* 39, no. 194 (Autumn 2019): 64.

Powers for support, and that China must build itself up on its own.”³⁰ All this nourished growing patriotism and nationalism and also sparked the quite strong anti-Christian movements of the 1920.³¹ “Already in 1922, new movements of intellectuals and students were refurbishing animadversions against Christianity and its missions for being political instruments of imperialism and were adding charges of cultural aggression and subversion of the Chinese identity.”³² This also channeled support into the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 in Shanghai, which culminated on 1st October 1949 with Chairman Mao Tse-tung proclaiming finally at Tiananmen Square: “The Chinese People have stood up!”³³

1. Celso Costantini and the Implementation of *Maximum Illud* in China

Only after World War I was over, was it possible to organize a national Synod in Shanghai and to think about the installation of an Apostolic Delegate. In 1919, Pope Benedict XV published the Encyclical Letter *Maximum Illud*, requesting urgently that native priests be ordained bishops in mission territories. The document also deplored “the effects of European nationalism on the Catholic Church in China and called for an eventual church administration organised by the Chinese clergy. However, the missionary clergy in China gave the letter a lukewarm response.”³⁴

Archbishop Celso Costantini was appointed in 1922 an Apostolic Delegate to China to oversee the implementation of *Maximum Illud* in this vast country. The task assigned was “the growth of an indigenous clergy and its assumption of greater responsibilities.”³⁵ Costantini’s appointment had to be prepared with greatest caution to overcome any possible political obstacles deriving from the French Protectorate. The matter of his appointment had to proceed with absolute secrecy, until his arrival in Hong Kong. “Before arriving in China, he was not to reveal his identity. He could not even tell his own mother. In fact, when he was leaving home, he could only tell her that he was going to a far off place to preach the Gospel.”³⁶ Cardinal Van Rossum urged him to make “every effort to implement

³⁰ Ibid., 64.

³¹ Jessie Gregory Lutz, *Chinese Politics and Christian Mission: The Anti-Christian Movement of 1920–28* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Cross Cultural Publications, 1988).

³² Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 228.

³³ Editorial, “Double Centenaries,” 64.

³⁴ E. O. Hanson, *Catholic Politics in China and Korea* (New York: Orbis Books, 1980), 22, quoted from Anthony Lam, “Archbishop Costantini and The First Plenary Council of Shanghai (1924),” *Tripod* 28, no. 148 (Spring 2008): 29–47, here 43.

³⁵ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 225.

³⁶ Francis Chong, “Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church,” *Tripod* 28, no. 148 (Spring 2008): 48–55, here 48–49.

the thought of the encyclical *Maximum Illud*. The most urgent matter is to hold the national council of bishops meeting as soon as possible.”³⁷

Costantini’s condensed for himself the following 5 principles inspired by *Maximum Illud*:

1. The representative of the Holy See is purely a religious person. His position should not have political flavor.
2. Be friendly and nice with everyone, no matter if they are Chinese officials or foreign diplomats. Preserve one’s own independence. Do not concern oneself with the advantages of the foreign powers. I am under the Pope, and serve only the Pope.
3. The Holy See does not get involved in politics. Sometimes politics enters religious circles, but that is only temporarily.
4. The Holy See does not have imperial ambitions in China. There is no connection between the politics of the foreign powers and the Holy See. The Holy See is concerned about China, and hopes China will become strong. It advocates China belonging to the Chinese.
5. The church is universal because its work is service. The Church has as a principle that local priests should be made bishops. After the establishment of the local hierarchy, the responsibilities of the missionaries can be considered completed. They should go as soon as possible to another place and open up new fields for mission.³⁸

To put this into daily practice and to avoid having any direct connection with foreign political powers in China, “he did put the office of the Apostolic Delegation in the Legation Quarters. When he went to visit the Chinese Foreign Minister, Gu Weijun 顧維鈞, he also explained how the stand of the Church was different from that of the foreign powers. The Church points out to people the real meaning of life and the moral power of faith. She does not bother with other things.”³⁹

That he was the right man at the right time, is affirmed by the German missionary Fr. Georg Weig SVD on the ground in a letter dated August 8, 1923, writing:

I got to know the Apostolic Delegate [Celso Costantini] in Wuchang at the Preparatory Meeting for the Shanghai Synod next year. I think, that he is the right man on the spot, who can advance the mission carriage of China. He will not experience a lack of resistance from Bishops and missionaries! Unfortunately, their attitude is still widely ‘negative.’ We have been together in Wuchang for four weeks, 21 missionaries from all parts of China, from all orders and congregations. It was not easy to bring these

³⁷ As quoted in *Ibid.*, 48–49.

³⁸ As quoted in *Ibid.*, 49–50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

people together, and a different person than the Delegate could not have accomplished it. Without him, a National Synod next year would not take place, because a considerable number of Bishops are against it. They want to muddle on with the old pattern. My trips in the last 2 years (to Tientsin, Peking, Shanghai, Wuchang-Hanksdow) revealed to me something. It is undeniable, that with the visitation of Msgr. Guebriant a new era in the Chinese Mission has arrived. We have escaped stagnation (sluggishness), the carriage rolls on again, not without great groaning.⁴⁰

In fact, the church needed to address most urgently the negative impact of the colonialist transnational French Protectorate and learn to respond properly and constructively to the new challenges of the Chinese nation in the midst of an epochal transition and growing Chinese patriotism. “The required steps included appointing Chinese bishops, forswearing any great-power protectorate for the Chinese faithful, and restricting the official foreign protection of missionaries to one’s own nationality. If some, such as Belgian or Spanish missionaries, wished to continue resorting to French protection, they would not be barred by the policy of the Holy See, but Chinese Catholics must not be included.”⁴¹ Costantini personally never “acceded to the official French wish that he be accompanied by diplomats on his visits with Chinese authorities.”⁴² The traditional *koutou* 叩頭, or kneeling or prostration by the Chinese faithful upon meeting their priests, was abolished, the display of the missionary’s national flag was discouraged, and the designation of foreign priests as “apostolic” missionaries was withdrawn, to eliminate inequality in any form of “their precedence over Chinese priests.”⁴³ Further, missions “should not seek indemnities for the killing of missionaries,”⁴⁴ which was wise, but in fact too little and too late. “By the late 1940s, the Communists understood the Chinese Boxers killed by foreign troops were symbols of true opposition to the imperialist missionary who had continued to gain an unfair stature by way of the Boxer indemnities exacted after 1900.”⁴⁵

Travelling from Hong Kong to Shanghai in late 1922, Costantini reflected on a “totally foreign-led church, he observed, made Catholicism look foreign to the

⁴⁰ Letter by Fr. Georg Weig SVD from Yenchow on 19th August 1923 to Fr. Friedrich in Rome, quoted from: Richard Hartwich, SVD, *Steyler Missionare in China: V. Aus Kriegeruinen zu neuen Grenzen 1920–1923 – Beiträge zu einer Geschichte* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1989), 343. Author’s translation.

⁴¹ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 228.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235. “By the late 1940s the Communists understood the Chinese Boxers killed by foreign troops as symbols of true opposition to the imperialist missionary who had continued to gain unfair stature by way of the Boxer indemnities exacted after 1900.”

⁴⁵ Robert E. Carbonneau, “Part Two: Republican China. 2. The Actors. 2.1. The Catholic Church in China 1900–1949,” in *Handbook of Christianity in China. Volume Two: 1800 to the Present*, ed. Rolf Gerhard Tiedemann (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 516–25, here 517.

Chinese. He judged, that a church could not be based on foreign supervision and protection."⁴⁶

THE SYNOD OF SHANGHAI 1924 AS FIRST PLENARY COUNCIL OF CHINA

To convene a plenary Council for China was the first urgent task of his mission as Delegate according to Cardinal van Rossum. Pope Pius XI himself commissioned Costantini "the duty of gathering together in the city of Shanghai all the Vicars and Prefects Apostolic of China, and of presiding in His name over the Council."⁴⁷ "Van Rossum, in anticipation of the meeting, mandated that there should be no act that might indicate an acknowledgment of foreign protectorates, and there should be no flags displayed except those of the pope and of China."⁴⁸

The Opening Ceremony was held on May 15th 1924 in the Cathedral St. Ignatius, Xujiahui, Shanghai. "Some 115 members of the Council, belonging to different nationalities and Religious Orders, coming from all parts of China, met for the first time in a General Assembly since the Gospel had been introduced into China many centuries previously."⁴⁹ All people could see "with their own eyes the catholicity of the Church, and understand that she is a super national organization transcending racial interests and national boundaries."⁵⁰ At that time there were 55 Apostolic Vicariates in China, 2552 priests, with 1071 native priests and some "two million Catholics attending religious services."⁵¹ 50 Bishops attended the Synod in Shanghai and 58 priests, among them only 11 native priests. "These men decided upon 861 stipulations concerning the education of clergy and lay people, the sacraments, the liturgy, mission methods, lawsuits, etc. These decisions which guided the ecclesiastical life in the following two decades were recorded in Latin."⁵²

One crucial aspect of the preparation of the First National Synod of China was the selection of two new Chinese leaders or apostolic prefects. Reverend Odoric Cheng Hede (成和德 1873–1928) and Reverend Melchior Sun Dezhen (孫德禎 1869–1951) were appointed prefect apostolic by Pope Pius XI in March and April

⁴⁶ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 226.

⁴⁷ Lam, "Archbishop Costantini," 29.

⁴⁸ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 227.

⁴⁹ Lam, "Archbishop Costantini," 29.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29, referring to Pasquale M. D' Elia, *Catholic Native Episcopacy in China, being an outline of the formation and growth of the Chinese Catholic clergy (1800-1926)* (Shanghai: T'usewei Print. Press, 1927).

⁵¹ Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 45.

⁵² Ibid., 45. Prof. Leeb also states there, that "unfortunately, the book was never translated into Chinese or any other language, thus Chinese historians have little access to the contents of this important document."

1924 before the Council of Shanghai convened. “Although the two Chinese prelates were an absolute minority among the dozens of foreign missionary church leaders, their presence carried the strong symbolic meaning that this was a Plenary Council ‘for’ the Chinese and, to some extent, ‘by’ the Chinese.”⁵³ Archbishop Costantini clarified this explicitly in his speech at the Opening Ceremony:

Among you there are two Chinese Prelates, recently raised to the Dignity of Prefects Apostolic; these, Venerable Brethren, are the fruit of your past labours, the grain of mustard that will grow into a large tree, and bring forth abundant fruit in the future. We all share the same unity of faith and disciple, and obey the same visible Head on earth, our Holy Father the Pope.⁵⁴

Besides these two first indigenous Chinese prelates as members of the hierarchy, there were another nine Chinese priests appointed to serve as consulting theologians in the five different Synodal Commissions, in addition of taking on other crucial functions necessary for the Plenary Council, and, even more importantly, “five of the nine Chinese priests became bishops. One of them even became archbishop when the Chinese Catholic Hierarchy was established in 1946.”⁵⁵ One participating priest was Philippus Zhao Bishop Philip Zhao Huai-yi 趙懷義, who had already been selected as personal Secretary by Costantini upon his arrival in China 1922 and who took on his Secretary Office on January 8, 1923. After serving in the Council he was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Xuanhwa (Zhili 直隸) on May 10th 1926, and was ordained in Rome on October 28, 1926 with five other Chinese Priests by Pope Pius XI. He chose as his Episcopal Motto: “I will sacrifice myself to the last breath.” Anthony Lam summarizes his episcopal ministry in the following words:

It was not long before he put his episcopal motto into practice. In 1929,⁵⁶ a civil war broke out in the area around Hebei and Inner Mongolia. The refugees had nowhere to go but to the Catholic cathedral. One night, Bishop Chao walked around the cathedral to see the refugees. He found them in such a miserable condition that he gave them his big robe. He caught a chill instantly. Unfortunately, the resulting cold reactivated a long illness. He failed to recover and passed away. He had been a bishop for only eight months.⁵⁷

Regarding the question of timing of the First National Synod, the time was truly right and ripe. “On the contrary, instead of waiting for a better environment, the Plenary Council itself created that better environment. We can say that the Plenary Council sped up the process of the indigenization of the Catholic Church in

⁵³ Lam, “Archbishop Costantini,” 30. Author’s emphasis.

⁵⁴ D’ Elia, *Catholic Native Episcopacy in China*, 72, quoted from Lam, “Archbishop Costantini,” 44.

⁵⁵ Lam, “Archbishop Costantini,” 36. See also the short biographies by Anthony Lam in his insightful article.

⁵⁶ This must have taken place in 1927. Author’s note.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

China.”⁵⁸ “The encouraging act of Pius XI in consecrating six Chinese bishops [in 1926] was, as anticipated, only the beginning of the sinification of the Chinese mission. The time was very appropriate, as it was just when Chinese national consciousness had reached its climax in the nineteen-twenties. Gradually the Chinese were put in command of the vicariates and prefectures, and their staff of priests were in some cases entirely Chinese.”⁵⁹

SELECTED ASPECTS OF INCULTURA & SINIFICATION OF THE SYNOD OF SHANGHAI 1924

Following the guidance given by the papal encyclical *Maximum Illud*, “the Council Fathers discussed a unified missionary direction, adapted to the Chinese nation and people.”⁶⁰ Because the Council “was not subject to any foreign influence”⁶¹ it could “reorganize priorities,” meaning, “nationality and citizenship were to be secondary to the Gospel. Chinese clergy and missionaries were to have equal rights. Chinese was to be the primary language. Religious women were to be employed to educate girls. Education in schools and universities was affirmed. Chinese customs were not to be criticized.”⁶²

On the level of the administration of hierarchy and Church, “Costantini succeeded in establishing the two local Chinese prefectures of Puqi 蒲圻 and Lixian 禮縣, with Monsignors Odoricsu Cheng Hede and Melchior Sun Dezhen in charge as prefects. The establishment of these two local Chinese prefectures was the first step in the localization of the Chinese Church. Before 1924 all the ecclesiastical territories were under the supervision of foreign vicars and prefects. There was not even the shadow of a Chinese prelate on the scene. Although there was a Chinese bishop, Luo Wenzao 羅文藻 (ordained in 1685), during the time of the Kangxi Emperor 康熙皇帝, this was only a one-off event.”⁶³

Let us now pick out some important aspects of the Synodal document itself, which is written in Latin and comprises 861 Articles in five Books. In the stipulations in Chapter 33 (“On Learning Mandarin Chinese”), the Synod 1924 demands to study Chinese well:

⁵⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁹ Columba Carl-Elwes, OSB, *China and the Cross: A Survey of Missionary History* (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1957), 240–241.

⁶⁰ Chong, “Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church,” 51.

⁶¹ Ibid., 51.

⁶² Carbonneau, “Part Two: Republican China. 2. The Actors. 2.1. The Catholic Church in China 1900–1949,” 520.

⁶³ Chong, “Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church,” 51.

166. *Missionarii ad Sinas accedentes existiment ita sibi studio linguae vernaculae incumbendum esse, non ut quadam modica cognitione contenti sint, sed ita ut expedite et emendate loqui possint. Quod primi sui ad Sinas adventus Missionarii insumunt tempus ad addiscendam linguam, postea ad usuram lucrabuntur, et donum linguae, per totum vitae spatium, eorum honestabit ministerium ac facilius efficaciusque reddet. Quapropter Patres concilii opportunum consent statuere ut novi Missionarii saltem primo anno, nullis aliis plerumque distenti curis, et designato magistro qui status temporibus lectiones illis tradat, incumbent studio linguae...Et quantum fieri potest, studio characterum sinensium se dedant.*⁶⁴

166. Missionaries who come to China should see it as a duty to study the vernacular language in such a way that they are not satisfied with a limited command of the language, but that they can speak it with ease and refinement. As the missionaries spend some time upon their arrival in China to learn the language, they will be later rewarded for these studies, since the gift of the language will ennoble their ministry and make it easier and more effective. Therefore, the participants of this council decide that new missionaries should be given at least one year in which they are free from other worries and can devote themselves to the study of the language. They should also be given a teacher who prepares regular lessons for them.⁶⁵

According to the Synod Fathers, in the minor and major seminaries, a general high standard of language learning is the aim among the Chinese seminarians, especially in regard to Latin and the native language.

672, no. 4: *Doceatur lingua latina ea ratione quae alumnos ad stadium philosophiae et theologiae praeparet: adeoque cum ex auctoribus classicis aureae aetatis, tum ex SS. Patribus, ne neglectis quidem nonnullis hymnis liturgicis et selectis Breviarii Romani lectionibus.*⁶⁶

672, no. 4: The Latin language should be taught because it prepares the alumni for the study of philosophy and theology, and they should read the authors of the classical golden age of Roman literature, as well as the texts of the Fathers of the Church, and of course also some liturgical hymns and selected readings from the Roman Breviary.⁶⁷

The Synod Fathers also expressed their concern for developing a proper Bible translation into Chinese and a unification of the Prayer Books and Catechism.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Concilium Sinense, *Primum Concilium Sinense Anno 1924: A Die 14 Maii Ad Diem 12 Iunii In Ecclesia S. Ignatii de Zi-Ka-Wei Celebratum: Acta, Decreta et Normae, Vota, etc.* (Zi-Ka-Wei: Typographia Missionis Catholicae, 1929), Titulis XXXIII: De studio linguae vernaculae, no. 166, p. 61 (henceforth abbreviated by PCS).

⁶⁵ The English translation from the Latin follows Leo Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 45–46. I am grateful to Prof. Leo Leeb for his kind permission to use it here.

⁶⁶ PCS, *Liber Quartus: De Evangelizatioinis Opere*, Caput VII: De Seminario Minori, 672, no. 4., p. 215.

⁶⁷ English Translation from Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 46–47.

⁶⁸ The first full translation of the New Testament was made by MEP missionary Jean Basset (1662–1707), and the Jesuit Fr. Louis de Poiret, SJ (1735–1813) produced translations of the Bible into Chinese and Manchu. For Robert Morrison (1782–1834), the translation of Basset was important for his own Bible translation. There was "no universally accepted Bible translation before the year 1968, when Fr. Allegra published the 'Studium Biblicum Franciscanum' Bible in Hong Kong." Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 47–48.

35. *Primum Concilium Sinense censet constituendum esse secundum comitatum, ex pluribus missionariis et sacerdotibus sinensibus constantem, cuius officium sit Sacras Scripturas, easque integras, in Sinicam linguam vertere.*⁶⁹

35. The First Synod of China decides that a commission should be formed, consisting of several missionaries and Chinese priests, whose task is to translate the whole Bible into the Chinese language.⁷⁰

The Synod worked to unify the much-used catechism and prayer books in its Articles 39–48 which was seen as even more urgent and necessary than the Bible translation.⁷¹

Maximum Illud urges that native priests be given first the same education as their foreign confreres. The Synod of Shanghai evaluated and confirmed explicitly the position of native clergy and their equality to foreign clergy in its Articles 131 and 132:

131. *Nullum officium clero indigenae, dummodo idoneo, praeccluditur.*⁷²

131. A native priest, if he is capable, should not be precluded from any ecclesiastical office.⁷³

132. *Primum Concilium Sinense libenti animo quae canon 305 docet amplectitur. Imo maxime cupit ut quam citissime illa dies illuscescat qua Sacerdotes sinenses etiam in episcopos eligantur.*⁷⁴

132. The First Chinese Synod wholeheartedly embraces canon 305. And it eagerly longs to see the day when Chinese priests will be nominated Bishops.⁷⁵

Canon 305 of the *CIC* 1917 stipulates:

“*Studiosissime curent, onerata graviter eorum conscientia, ut ex christianis indigenis seu incolis suae regionis probati clerici rite instituantur ac sacerdotio initiuntur. / They must studiously take care, their conscience being gravely burdened, that, from among the indigenous Christians or inhabitants of their region, suitable clerics be formed and initiated into priesthood.*”⁷⁶

In its Articles 642 and 648, the Synod of 1924 formulated even stronger that the Church is to be “built upon the native clergy” (*pro Ecclesia e clero indigena condenda*) in view of which proper “preparatory colleges and seminaries” are necessary to be established, in which “young clergymen can grow in piety and

⁶⁹ *PCS*, Liber Primus: Normae Generales, Titulus VIII: De Commissionibus, Caput II: De peritorum Commissione seu Comitatu pro versione Sinica Sacrarum Scripturarum, no. 35, p. 33.

⁷⁰ Quoted from Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷² *PCS*, Liber Secundus: De Personis et Officiis, Art. 131, p. 55.

⁷³ Quoted from Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 50.

⁷⁴ *PCS*, Liber Secundus: De Personis et Officiis, Art. 132, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Quoted from Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 50.

⁷⁶ *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Pii X Pontificis Maximi, iussu digestus; Benedicti Papæ XV, auctoritate promulgatus (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1918); English translation: *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law*, tr. Edward N. Peters (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001).

knowledge. (*in quibus novus clerus, pietate optime instituendus et scientia, adolescat ac magisque crescat.*)⁷⁷

Overall, Celso Costantini turned out to be far-sighted in regard to the field of education. “At the first synod of the Chinese Catholic Church in 1924, one decision taken was that in different areas of China, the Church would establish 14 regional seminaries. The purpose would be to offer a higher quality of education in philosophy and theology to youth seeking to follow the path to priesthood.”⁷⁸ John Tong concludes, that “it was not until the first synod of the Chinese Catholic Church in 1924, and at the urging of the Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini, that an overall plan was drawn up to establish fourteen regional seminaries. In 1949 there were sixteen regional seminaries throughout the country, and many local major and minor seminaries.”⁷⁹ Costantini put also a strong emphasis on education in Chinese culture. “He urged seminarians and young priests to conscientiously study Mandarin Chinese (*baihua* 白話), so that later when they were preaching the Gospel, they would sound convincing. He also encouraged the bishops and heads of missions to send suitable seminarians and young priests to Beijing’s Furen University, Shanghai’s Zhendan University, or any other university to study Chinese and the Humanities.”⁸⁰ He facilitated even to send seminarians to Rome to the study at the Urbanianum University. When Costantini left China in 1933, “he had sent over 40 seminarians to Rome for further studies.”⁸¹ Among them were Yu Bin [于斌], later Archbishop of Nanking and Cardinal, and Fan Xueyan [范學淹], later Bishop of Baoding 保定, Luo Guang, Du Baojin and others. Many became outstanding leaders of the Catholic Church of China.

The positive approach and attitude towards Chinese culture and language can also be seen in other articles of the Synod, even to the point of the relevance of cultural anthropology for priest and missionaries. The Synod clearly admonished foreigners to honor positive cultural elements of the Chinese Culture and to refrain from critical remarks:

694. Nostrum non est Sinensium defectus verbis aut scriptis denunciare, multoque minus mores, institua, legesue, quae non sint aperte mala, in damnationem aut in contemptionem adducere.

Quod si quando malas consuetudines describere necesse sit, vel iniurias contra nostrum S. Religionem ac Missiones refellere, semper cum caritate agatur, qua non

⁷⁷ Quoted from Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 50; Latin: PCS, Liber Quartus, De Evangelizatioinis Opere, no. 642 (p. 208) and no. 648 (p. 210).

⁷⁸ Chong, “Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church,” 53.

⁷⁹ John Tong [Archbishop Cardinal], “Seminary Formation in China Today and Prospectus for the Future,” in *Historiography of the Chinese Catholic Church: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Jerome Heyndrickx (Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, 1994), 159–68, here 159.

⁸⁰ Chong, “Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church,” 53–54.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

*tantum iudicis sed patris magistrique animus elucescat: ut Sinenses sibi persuasum habeant nos sincere in eos impelli amore, etiam dum eos obiurgamus ut a vitiis corrigantur.*⁸²

694. It is not our duty to denounce the shortcomings of the Chinese, nor should we condemn or despise customs or rules which are not obviously evil.

But if it is necessary to talk about bad habits or to defend our Faith against attacks, then it should always be in a loving way, showing not so much the authority of a judge, but rather of a father and a teacher, so that the Chinese believe that we are motivated by love, even if we scold them so that they correct their vices.⁸³

696: *Quae bona sunt in Sinensium moribus, ex. Gr. Pietas filialis, debitis honestentur laudibus.*⁸⁴

The positive elements in Chinese customs, such as filial piety, should be honored with due praise.⁸⁵

The Synod also mentions the relevance of indigenous culture in music and architecture, in which Celso Costantini shows special interest and affinity due to his previous ministry in Italy.⁸⁶

525. *Musica Sinica in ecclesiis admitti potest, dummodo non sit profana, et tempore et more debito perficiatur. Excluduntur vero ordinarie, in Missionum ecclesiis, cantica in lingua Missionariorum propria.*⁸⁷

525. Chinese music can be admitted in the churches, as long as it is not profane, and if it is performed in the proper time and suitable way. However, in the mission churches songs in the native language of the missionaries are normally excluded.⁸⁸

⁸² PCS, Liber Quartus: De Evangelizationis Opere, Art. 694, p. 221.

⁸³ Quoted from Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 51.

⁸⁴ PCS, Liber Quartus: De Evangelizationis Opere, Art. 696, p. 222.

⁸⁵ Quoted from Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 51.

⁸⁶ J.C. Willke, "Costantini, Celso," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York et al.: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 366–67. Costantini acquired a lot of knowledge and skills in preserving the sacred before, during, and after World War I, for instance as the conservator of the ancient basilica of Aquileia, Italy, in founding the society Amici dell' Arte Sacra, and in initiating the illustrated art review *Arte cristiana* (p. 366). In regard to adaption to native Chinese styles in the case of the Catholic University in Peking, see the critical evaluation of his adaption to native styles in architecture by R. Le Clair, "Missionary Art," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 907–19, here 908: "The idea had elements of value but was vitiated by the fact that 'adaption' was understood in the light of another copy—this time, of native styles. If the basic idea had been one of assimilation and transformation in the hands of intelligent, progressive practitioners, missionary art might have witnessed a flowering of a vital and creative art."

⁸⁷ PCS, Liber Tertius: De Rebus, Pars Tertia: De Culto Divino, Titulus XVII: De musica sara et cantu gregoriano, Art. 525, p. 178.

⁸⁸ Quoted from Leeb, "National Synod of 1924," 55.

453. *In aedificandis et ornandis sacris aedibus et residentis missionariorum non tantum exterae artis forma adhibeatur, set, quantum fieri potest, nativa etiam sinensis gentis artis species, pro opportunitate, servetur.*⁸⁹

453. For the construction and embellishment of sacred halls [churches] and missionary residences not only foreign patterns and forms should be used, but also, as much as possible, native shapes and expressions of the Chinese nation, if it is opportune.⁹⁰

51. *Item, si missionarii monumenta geologica, paleontologica, archeologica, historica, artistica et cetera huiusmodi invenerint, haec servant; auxiliumque praebeant, si quis missionariorum, ex Superiorum mandato, in iisdem studiis versatur.*⁹¹

51. Also, if missionaries find geological, paleontological, archeological, historical, artistic and other monuments, they should preserve them; they should also help those missionaries who, by order of their superiors, conduct studies in these areas.⁹²

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the fundamental reforms of *Maximum Illud* turned out to be heavy in China, “against the dead weight of a tradition of over three centuries and against the power and property of the congregations.”⁹³ But Costantini sowed plenty seeds in his legacy of implementing *Maximum Illud*. The stipulations of the Synod of Shanghai, as First National Synod of China, respected the native Chinese culture and the native clergy, and opened a way for proper sinicization. “Seen from the historical background of the ‘Anti-Christian Movement’ of 1922 and the extreme anti-foreign protests of 1925 and 1927, when huge numbers of Protestant missionaries left China, the Synod arrived at mature decisions and showed a spirit of prudence, fairness and farsightedness.”⁹⁴ Of course, Costantini challenged the status quo of the outdated but still dominating French Protectorate. “By 1928, the [...] French minister to China was characterizing Costantini as an open enemy of the French Religious Protectorate and a friend of the new Nationalist Party government.”⁹⁵ Despite his own efforts and the efforts of two popes, “the French

⁸⁹ PCS, Liber Tertius: De Rebus, Pars Secunda: De Locis et Temporibus Sacris, Titulus X: De Locis sacris, Art. 453, p. 160.

⁹⁰ Quoted from Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 55.

⁹¹ PCS, Liber Primus: Normae Generalis, Art. 51, p. 37.

⁹² “51. *Item, si missionarii monumenta geologica, paleontologica, archeologica, historica, artistica et cetera huiusmodi invenerint, haec servant; auxiliumque praebeant, si quis missionariorum, ex Superiorum mandato, in iisdem studiis versatur.*” Quoted from: Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 55.

⁹³ Celso Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina (1922-1933): memorie di fatti e di idee*, vol. 2 (Rome: Unione Missionaria del Clero in Italia, 1946), 379, quoted from Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 243.

⁹⁴ Leeb, “National Synod of 1924,” 56.

⁹⁵ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 236.

government could still work its will on major matters regarding the Catholic Church in China.”⁹⁶ Many improvements went ahead slowly but firmly and steadily. Costantini went ahead with the careful selection of 6 episcopal candidates and travelled himself with them on 10th of September 1926 from Shanghai to Rome. “On October 26th, 1926, Pope Pious XI consecrated this first group of local Chinese bishops to the episcopacy in St. Peter’s Basilica. With the Holy Father himself conducting the ordination of the first group of Chinese bishops, the foundation for the future development of the indigenization of the Church was established.”⁹⁷ After planting the missions and Gospel for centuries, finally the church itself could be planted with this crucial nucleus of a native Chinese episcopacy.⁹⁸ “When he left China for the last time [1933], he could point to the nineteen percent of ecclesiastical units in the country that were headed by Chinese priests, 23 out of 121, up from zero when he had first come [1922].”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., 242.

⁹⁷ Chong, “Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church,” 52.

⁹⁸ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 243.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 243.