

New Windows Shed Light on China's Catholic Church

By Adam Minter in Shanghai
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THE 7:30 A.M. Sunday Mass at Shanghai's Xujiahui Cathedral has just ended and the nearly 1,000-member congregation is slowly working its way down the aisle of this century-old church. From above, sunlight streams down through clear glass windows, brilliantly lighting the faces of the mostly Chinese worshippers. As the congregants leave, pushing against a group arriving for the next Mass, a few pause to notice a strong purple glow emanating from a small chapel in the back of the church.

Sixty years ago, this French Gothic-style church would have been awash in such coloured light, spilling down from more than 900 stained-glass panels. But in the decades after the 1949 communist revolution, Shanghai's cathedral suffered neglect and vandalism, culminating in the destruction of its windows. Now, slowly but surely, the windows are being remade. Not as they were, though. Gone are the European-style images of saints and sinners. Instead, these new windows will be filled with imagery drawn from traditional paper cut-outs, block seals and Chinese iconography.

"It's our tradition," explains Father Thomas Lucas, an associate professor of art at the University of San Francisco and consultant to the Shanghai diocese's five-year project to restore the stained glass of China's largest church. "But it will integrate 5,000 years of Chinese tradition."

The restoration of Xujiahui's 350 square metres of glass is much more than an exercise in cross-cultural aesthetics. In many ways, it's a reflection of how Catholics in China's most important diocese have found their own accommodation both with China's culture and -- as importantly -- its communist leadership under the guidance of Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian.

In 1949, Shanghai was home to approximately 100,000 Catholics; today, despite decades of official repression under communism, it's estimated that the figure exceeds 150,000. They worship in 121 churches (all but four of which have been built or restored since 1982), guided by 73 priests and 98 nuns. There are more populous dioceses in China, yet none rivals Shanghai in influence. Before 1949, its Jesuit colleges were the intellectual centre of Chinese Catholicism.

Over the past 20 years, Bishop Jin, 88, a Jesuit trained in those colleges, has restored that traditional role, distributing 1 million copies of his translation of the New Testament and 500,000 Chinese-language missals, or Mass books, throughout China. In the process, he has almost single-handedly assured the adoption of Chinese in place of Latin in China's churches. Sitting in his book-lined office in the back of the cathedral, Bishop Jin reflects upon the evolution of China's Catholicism in the 20th century, and the life of the cathedral he has spent nearly 20 years restoring. "So beautiful, so beautiful," he recalls of Xujiahui before the revolution. "The colours were more than you could imagine."

The original windows were designed and manufactured in the early 1900s by two Spanish Jesuits. Uncharacteristically, the Jesuits failed to leave records or photos of the actual windows or their designs. The consequence of that oversight became apparent after the windows were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. Jin, along with China's other church leaders, was in prison at the time, and he was unaware of the damage until he was released in 1979, after 27 years in custody.

Despite his long years in China's prisons, Jin is, in the eyes of some conservative Catholics in the West, not a martyr but a turncoat. That's because, after being set free, he chose in 1985 to accept an appointment as bishop of Shanghai not from the Vatican, which governs the Roman Catholic Church worldwide, but from Beijing's government-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA).

The Vatican and Beijing do not maintain diplomatic relations and, despite some recent dialogue, the two entities are seriously divided over the question of the ordination of bishops. As a result of this and other issues dating to the communist revolution, China has an "underground" Roman Catholic Church that refuses to submit to any authority but Rome's, particularly in the appointment of bishops. Bishops, priests and ordinary members of the underground church have suffered harassment for decades: In March, for instance, the underground bishop of Qiqihar in the rural north of China, Wei Jingyi, was arrested.

But on a doctrinal level, the gap between the churches has been narrowing: Beginning in 1988, Jin inserted a



"Prayer for the Pope" into hundreds of thousands of Chinese prayer books. In 1990, the prayer was inserted into the Mass. "We are not just Chinese Catholics," he says. "We are Roman Catholics."

Much to the dismay of some church conservatives, the Vatican has never declared the CPA to be schismatic, and it's a poorly kept secret that the Vatican has quietly recognized the leadership of most CPA bishops. In Bishop Jin's case, the support has been voiced tacitly. In 2001, for instance, Jin's autobiography was published in a Vatican magazine. CPA priests and nuns of the Shanghai diocese are currently being educated at leading seminaries, convents and Catholic universities throughout the United States and Europe. Building projects -- including the restoration at Xujiahui -- have received financial and institutional support from Roman Catholic religious orders. Jin himself regularly receives European leaders in Shanghai, including, recently, European Commission President Romano Prodi.

"Jin's situation is hardly anomalous in church history," explains a historian and Vatican watcher, who points out that the Vatican negotiated with Mussolini and Franco on the naming of bishops. "Jin serves as *de facto* bishop, not *de jure* bishop in the eyes of Rome." Jin smiles when asked about his position in the church and Beijing. "I believe in tact and dialogue. Not confrontation."

Jin's dialogue with Beijing is important to the future of Catholicism in China. Equally important is the continuing dialogue he has created between Catholicism and Chinese culture. Since the late 1960s, the Vatican has encouraged national churches to be more open to non-Western cultures, and to include elements from them in the design of churches and ceremonies. In China, Jin has presided over a liturgical and theological shift overtly designed to make Catholicism culturally relevant to the



country's Catholics and, more importantly, its non-Christians. The redesign of Xujiahui's windows is the most public expression of this change.

"I told Bishop Jin that if he wanted to create a museum of goopy French windows, I could help him find someone to do that," recalls Father Lucas from the workshop that is producing Xujiahui's new windows. "But I told him that if he wants to do something inculturated, something that speaks to today's Chinese Catholics, then I'm interested in doing it."

Jin agreed to Lucas's approach and appointed Beijing native Wo Ye, 42, to design the windows. It is an unprecedented commission: Large-scale window restorations are typically performed by multiple workshops and designers. Wo has been granted the entire cathedral. Church art experts, including Lucas, are unable to cite another single designer -- much less, a female designer -- given such a commission. Wo, who creates the windows with three of the diocese's nuns, is unimpressed by her status. "I really just want to create something that speaks to the Chinese who walk into the cathedral," she says. There are few artists as qualified as Wo for the job. Formally trained as a Chinese porcelain painter, she spent most of her 30s abroad, studying church art in Catholic schools and universities.

The first year of the restoration will focus upon a series of 44 nave chapel windows on Xujiahui's ground level. Each contains three panels, with the middle containing a gospel image rendered as a simplified traditional woodcut by Wo. In the lower panel, four Chinese characters, composed by Jin and rendered as a chop, describe the scene. In the upper panel, a traditional Chinese iconographic element complements the gospel image. For example, a gospel image of the Virgin Mary is accompanied not by a white lily, as it would be in European iconography, but by a classic Chinese image of a lotus. Next year, the large rose window at the back of the cathedral -- now an empty space surrounded by 12 empty spaces -- will be rendered as a phoenix surrounded by the Chinese zodiac. According to Lucas, in its original incarnation the rose window almost certainly contained a Western zodiac.

The restoration may be at an early stage, but Lucas is already contemplating other projects. "I told the bishop that if we are even moderately successful, he will have more work than he can handle," the priest says. "China has a lot of churches that lost their windows."

Conceivably, Wo Ye's designs may one day be found in churches across China. But even if Xujiahui is the only restoration for Shanghai's glass workshop, there is little question that Wo's designs will be carefully scrutinized, both in China and abroad, as the visual expression of a new Chinese Catholicism. "They will be accepted and understood by the young people," Bishop Jin says. "That's what's important." He pauses, and then laughs. "The old people will go to heaven soon enough."

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