

Making disciples of all nations: Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke and his apostolate to overseas Chinese 1953–77

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This article investigates the understudied mission of Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke CICM as Apostolic Visitor for the Chinese overseas from 1953 to his retirement in 1970. Although Chinese had settled overseas from as far back as the twelfth century, the Catholic Church never had a significant presence among these communities, except in British colonial era Singapore-Malaya. Following the mid-twentieth century forced exodus of Chinese seminarians and Western missionaries from the mainland after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Holy See responded by redirecting missionary efforts through the initiatives of Bishop van Melckebeke and his colleagues to this major ethnic group scattered across the world. This article deals with this unprecedented apostolate to these diasporic communities, in a substantially different manner from previous scholarship on Catholicism in China in terms of notions of institution, and the framing of missionary activities, networks, and resources. Based on archival resources, media reports and interviews, it recounts how the Office of Apostolic Visitor and the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau extended their mission beyond the politics of the Cold War, and organised a variety of ministries to serve the overseas Chinese population residing on five continents.

This article investigates the unprecedented apostolic work of institutional Catholicism, represented by the Holy See, to care for the spiritual welfare of overseas Chinese from 1949 onwards, something commonly seen as strategically important in the Western bloc during the Cold War. When the doors of the vast field of mainland China were closed by the Communist regime, it became the urgent task of the Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide, the Holy See's department responsible for directing foreign missions, to relocate hundreds of Chinese clergy and reorganise its missionary efforts among the Chinese-speaking population living in the rest of the world. This article will focus on the role of Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke CICM (1898–1980), a Belgian missionary with rich pastoral experience in opening up

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mission fields in northwest China, who pioneered this newly created apostolate from 1953 to 1977.

Scholarship on the post-1949 Catholic Church in China has mostly concentrated on its internal dynamics after the Communist takeover, particularly the establishment of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which broke ties with the Holy See, declared the Church to be self-governing, and orchestrated the ordination of bishops without papal mandate, but as a consequence, spawned an ‘underground’ church that declared its firm loyalty to Rome.¹ This article may serve as a complementary story to the post-1949 history of Chinese Catholicism by providing a perspective beyond the boundaries of mainland China, to Catholic missionary work among the diaspora.

In particular, the conceptual framework of religious nationalism (1880–1940s), followed by religious ethnocentrism (1950s–present day) on the construction of identities among diasporic Chinese Protestants suggested by Joshua Dao-wei Sim seems applicable to the development of Chinese Catholicism outside China. As Sim argues, ‘religion has been central for identity making within the Chinese diaspora’;² specifically, religious nationalism, ‘a synthesis that encompassed nation in religion and religion in nation’, was a major contributor to moulding a nationalist identity among Chinese Protestants in Southeast Asia in the years leading up to and including the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War. In Singapore, for example, a transnational and cross-denominational organisation called the Singapore Chinese Christian Inter-Church Union was founded in 1931. The immigrant pastors ‘attempted to imagine themselves as part of China’s Protestant sphere by creating transnational linkages that enabled them to express their loyalty to China’. Chinese Protestants overseas were called to support ‘national salvation’ (*jiuguo*) campaigns which looked to China instead of their host countries. A similar discourse of national salvation also received a warm response from Chinese Protestant Churches in the United States, because of their growing animosity towards Western imperialism, touched off by experiences of racial discrimination and social dislocation.³

Religious ethnocentrism replaced religious nationalism in post-colonial Southeast Asia. Sim describes it as ‘a non-political, globally oriented ethno-religious identity’ for overseas Chinese Christian communities constructed ‘through independent Chinese evangelical institutions and networks that were established across several continents’. The main concern of their discourses was to proselytise the faith to the Chinese diaspora and recontextualise the construction of their identity ‘within new ethno-centred religious spatial mappings’. Although many Chinese Protestants who emigrated to

1 Relevant studies include James T. Myers, *Enemies without guns: The Catholic Church in China* (New York: Professors World Peace Academy, 1991); Chan Kim-kwong, *Struggling for survival: The experience of the Catholic Church in China from 1949 to 1970* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1992); Anthony Lam Sui-ki, *Shui zhu chenfu: Zhongguo tianzhujiao dangdai lishi fanxing* [The Catholic Church in present-day China: Through darkness and light] (Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre, 1994); Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and hope in an emerging civil society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Gu Yulu, ed., *Zhongguo tianzhujiao shuping* [A review of the Chinese Catholic Church] (Shanghai: Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2005).

2 Joshua Dao-wei Sim, ‘The formation of global Chinese Christian identities’, in *Routledge International handbook of religion in global society*, ed. Jayeel Cornelio, François Gauthier, Thomas Martikainen and Linda Woodhead (Milton Park: Routledge, 2021), p. 288.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 283–4.

escape Communist rule ‘remained privately loyal to the Republic of China [Kuomintang government]’, they shifted their hopes for Chinese Christianity onto the global Chinese communities.⁴ Specifically, this article discusses how the Holy See redirected its missionary efforts from a geographical region (China) to embrace the global diaspora in the 1950s in the context of Jeremy E. Taylor’s contention that Bishop van Melckebeke’s appointment still ‘reflected a very mainland China-focused understanding of the overseas Chinese for Rome’.⁵

The Holy See’s shift of focus coincided with the mass exodus of missionary workers around the time of the Communist takeover of China in 1949, which marked a turning point in the development of both Catholic and Protestant communities among the Chinese living in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. John Roxborough describes ‘the largest influx of missionary personnel that Malaya was ever to experience’, in particular Chinese-speaking workers from various Christian missions, after they were forced out of Communist China. Coordinated by the Malayan Christian Council, the missionaries were invited by the British colonial government to serve an estimated 500,000 Chinese forcibly resettled from their rural settlements into ‘New Villages’ fenced and patrolled by troops during the Malayan Emergency (declared by the United Kingdom in their war against the Malayan Communist Party, 1948–60) as a means to prevent the guerrillas, a majority of whom were ethnic Chinese from similar areas, from obtaining food, medical supplies and recruits from the villagers. Though ‘the modest results were disappointing’ in the New Villages, Roxborough indicates that a good number of Churches in Malaysia trace their origins to this period.⁶ However, the Catholic Church, as mentioned below, abstained from involvement in the controversial security measures.

Scholarship on the development of overseas Chinese Christian communities and their ethno-religious identity, however, has concentrated on the new diasporic era after China’s reopening in the 1980s, which led to a much larger and wider geographic distribution of the overseas Chinese population than ever. Whether their church members are from mainland China or elsewhere, many transnational Chinese Protestant groups have continued to maintain their ethnic identity. Pál Nyíri portrays a complex picture of evangelism among the overseas Chinese that ‘is no longer a homogenous or Western project: much of evangelical globalisation takes place through non-Western initiatives’.⁷ Hong Kong or Taiwan-born Chinese evangelicals in the United States who established a national, and then global, network of fellowships, churches, seminaries, and various missionary undertakings maintain a distinct

4 Ibid., p. 285.

5 Jeremy E. Taylor, ‘Visiting the “overseas Chinese”: Vatican engagement with the Chinese diaspora in Cold War Southeast Asia’, in *Chineseness and the Cold War: Contested cultures and diaspora in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong*, ed. Jeremy E. Taylor and Lanjun Xu (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 159.

6 John Roxborough, *A short introduction to Malaysian church history: A guide to the story of Christianity in Malaysia and how to go about discovering the history of your church*, Malaysian Church History Series no. 1, 2nd rev. ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Seminari Theoloji Malaysia; Catholic Research Centre, 1989), pp. 3–15, <http://roxborough.com/sea/country/shmalaysia.htm> (last accessed 27 May 2022); A correspondent, ‘Resettling Chinese in Malaya: Christian workers’ part’, *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Dec. 1953.

7 Pál Nyíri, ‘Moving targets: Chinese Christian proselytising among transnational migrants from the People’s Republic of China’, *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2, 2 (2003): 268.

ethnic identity ‘rather than integrate into global evangelical structures’.⁸ Cao Nanlai has studied migrant church networks in Italy and France founded by mainland Chinese who brought their faith from their hometowns and proselytise only to others in their community. These Chinese Protestant groups have maintained their distinctive identity with ‘Christian-filtered Chinese cultural values’ and have avoided contact with non-Chinese local churches or congregations.⁹

Both diasporic Chinese Protestant and Catholic communities have greatly contributed to the revival of Christianity in China through the remittance of church construction funds and the moulding of a younger generation of church leaders.¹⁰ Taking previous scholarship into account, this article examines the course of development of overseas Chinese Catholic communities to the extent that they were able to help in triggering the vitality of Christianity in present-day China. It also complements current literature on the extremely broad and diverse field of overseas Chinese studies. While a plethora of studies has been conducted on the global history of Chinese migration, little attention has been paid to religious dimensions, especially to Catholicism—a minority religion in mainland China. However, a multitude of conversions to Catholicism were recorded in overseas Chinese communities during the second half of the twentieth century. Although a minority, the Chinese Catholic communities scattered all over the world ‘are often active and welcome young catechumens everywhere’.¹¹ It is therefore worthwhile to explore the ministry of Bishop van Melckebeke and a relatively unknown institution called the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau, which was set up by him to organise the transnational missionary work.

Given that the Bishop’s tenure coincided with the Cold War and the Catholic Church’s bitter experience with the Chinese Communist Party, a major target of ministry may be assumed to be a spiritual battle with communism to prevent its spread through Southeast Asia. This article, however, contends that Van Melckebeke’s mission extended beyond such a political agenda or passive resistance to communism on the one hand, and also beyond its initial sphere of Southeast Asia on the other. In addition, the mission among overseas Chinese was not without awareness of the difficulties faced by Christians who remained in mainland China. Using archival material, media reports and oral history interviews, this article demonstrates the multifaceted features of Van Melckebeke’s apostolate to the Chinese-speaking population on a global scale through the various arms of the Bureau, its results, and the changes that took place over time.

Early life

Carlo van Melckebeke was born in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, near Brussels, and entered the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM, also known as

8 Ibid., p. 272.

9 Cao Nanlai, ‘A Sinicized world religion? Chinese Christianity at the contemporary moment of globalisation’, *Religions* 10, 459 (2020): 3–4, 8.

10 Chris White and Jifeng Liu, ‘Going global and back again: The transformation of Chinese Christian networks between Southeast Asia and China since the 1980s’, in *Chinese religions going global*, ed. Cao Nanlai, Giuseppe Giordan and Yang Fenggang (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 125–33; Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China, A.D. 600 to 2000* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), pp. 454, 513.

11 Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, ‘Les Chinois de la diaspora’, *Études* (July–Aug. 1987): 24–5.

the Scheut Mission)¹² at the age of 18 in the middle of the First World War (1914–18). A year after his ordination to the priesthood in September 1922, he set foot on Chinese soil and studied the Chinese language for a year. Then he served in three parishes on the Loess Plateau in northern China for a decade (1924–33). Upon his second arrival in China, he became the rector of the Catholic Hospital in Guisui (capital of Suiyuan province, later renamed Hohhot) for a further decade (1936–46),¹³ which overlapped with the difficult time of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). The well-equipped modern hospital with 120 beds gave free medical treatment to low-income patients and wounded Chinese soldiers.¹⁴ From March 1943 to August 1945, he was interned by Japanese troops in Weixian, Shandong province, and then placed under house confinement in Beijing.¹⁵

In March 1946, Pope Pius XII named Father van Melckebeke vicar apostolic of Ningxia. A month later, the pope pronounced the establishment of the Catholic Hierarchy, namely the formal ecclesiastical structure in China, resulting in the elevation of 20 vicariates apostolic to the status of archdiocese and 79 to diocese. Accordingly, Father van Melckebeke was ordained as the first bishop of Ningxia on 30 May. His diocese covered an extensive, desert-like region from the China–Mongolia border in the north to the northern part of Shaanxi province in the south. Despite the great difficulties faced by missionary workers,¹⁶ after the Holy See divided the vicariate apostolic of southwestern Mongolia into two distinct mission units—the vicariates of Ningxia and Suiyuan—in 1922, the local Catholic population doubled to about 44,000 in the 1940s.¹⁷

In the first year following the Communist ‘liberation’ of Ningxia in September 1949, Bishop van Melckebeke was able to manage his diocese in a normal manner, including making tours of rural parishes and administering the sacrament of confirmation. He and his priests organised the Legion of Mary, a lay apostolate association that yielded tangible results in revitalising the enthusiasm and devotion of Catholics. The Legion of Mary distributed prayer books, pamphlets, religious images and medals, as well as published a guide for catechists in parishes without priests. In the meantime, the Communist authorities stepped up their efforts to take control of the Church. Bishop van Melckebeke was arrested in April 1952. After five months of inhumane prison life, he received a ‘humiliating but perfunctory public trial’ in mid-September. The bishop and his secretary, Father André van den Eerenbeemt CICM (1912–58), were then escorted to the port city of Tianjin. On 6 October,

12 The Scheut Mission was founded in 1862 by Father Theophiel Verbist CICM (1823–68) for the propagation of Christianity in China. It sent a total of 679 missionaries to China between 1865 and 1955 across an extensive region north of the Great Wall, from Chahar to Xinjiang.

13 Dirk van Overmeire, ed., *Elenchus of CICM in China 1865–1955* (Taipei: Witness Monthly, 2008), p. 581.

14 Carlo van Melckebeke, *En mongolie: L'action sociale de l'Eglise catholique*, trans. Mingyuan Fu (Beijing: St. Thomas Aquinas Institute, 1949), pp. 104, 138–9.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 147–50.

16 In 1948 the Ningxia diocese was staffed by 70 priests, 37 of them Scheut missionaries and 33 either Chinese or Mongol; 5 Belgian and 63 native religious sisters worked in mission schools and dispensaries. Charles J. McCarthy, ‘Red threat forces retirement of 4 China missionaries after 200 years combined service’, *NCWC News Service*, 19 Apr. 1948.

17 Melckebeke, *En mongolie*, pp. 4–5; McCarthy, ‘Red threat’.

Communist police officers put them on a vessel sailing southward to Hong Kong. At that time, 14 Chinese priests of his diocese were in prison, but some 20 priests who still had relative freedom were determined to perform their duties to the end.¹⁸

New apostolate to the Chinese overseas

While on board the ship, the 54-year-old bishop asked his secretary: ‘Now what are we going to do?’ The answer came to him in Hong Kong, a British colony, where he found 1.5 million refugees who had recently streamed out of the PRC. He visited the Philippines and also researched the challenges faced by the Chinese communities in other Southeast Asian countries. Then, on his return to Belgium, he visited the Vatican in December, borrowed a cassock and a mantle to meet Pope Pius XII, and offered himself to work among the Chinese overseas.¹⁹ In a long proposal, he called upon about 2,500 missionaries who like him had been ousted from China, who might ‘face a difficult process of re-adaptation to new customs and ways of living and the learning of other languages’ if they were assigned to new mission territories, to take up the apostolate to the Chinese living away from their homeland.²⁰

From the CICM archives at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, a letter dated 15 February 1953 from Archbishop Antonio Riberi (1897–1967), Apostolic Internuncio to China who had moved to Taipei four months previously, asked the CICM superior general if Bishop van Melckebeke could be seconded to collaborate with the Internunciature in general missionary activity, such as the care of Chinese communities in the Pacific.²¹ In reply, the superior general pointed out that he had no authority over Van Melckebeke, who was still the bishop of Ningxia—both the Holy See and his priests had dissuaded him from resignation²²—and his future assignment depended directly on the Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide.

Bishop van Melckebeke was formally appointed Apostolic Visitor to the Chinese Overseas (*huaqiao jiaowu shicha yuan*) in Southeast Asia on 5 May 1953 (see [fig. 1](#)).²³ According to the directives of Propaganda Fide, the Apostolic Visitor was responsible for the care of all Chinese seminarians and priests outside the PRC, who had been placed under the jurisdiction of Propaganda Fide, until they could return to their home dioceses and place themselves under the immediate dependence of their respective bishops. In addition, the Apostolic Visitor was to coordinate and promote the Catholic apostolate to ‘provide for the spiritual good of the Chinese in Southern

18 ‘S. Ex. Mgr. Carlo M.J. van Melckebeke, Évêque de Ningsia’, *Missions de Scheut*, 2 (Feb.) 1953, pp. 45–7; ‘Un évêque expulsé de Chine, décidé à travailler parmi les chinois de l’extérieur’ [Bishop expelled from China, determined to work among the Chinese overseas], *Agenzia Fides*, 27 Dec. 1952, extracted from *Missions de Scheut*, 1 (Jan.) 1953, p. 25.

19 ‘Un évêque expulsé de Chine’.

20 ‘Bishop calls on red-ousted missionaries to take apostolate to 12 million Chinese emigrants’, *NCWC News Service*, 2 Mar. 1953.

21 A. Riberi to J. Vandeputte [superior general], 15 Feb. 1953 (Taipei), Items coming from the (Inter) Nunciature Apostolic (Mgr. A. Riberi), Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, Documentation and Research Centre on Religion Culture and Society, Leuven, Belgium (hereafter KADOC-KU Leuven), BE/942855/1262/2048.

22 ‘Un évêque expulsé de Chine’.

23 Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, ‘Decretum’, Prot. 1785/53, 5 May 1953, Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC-KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

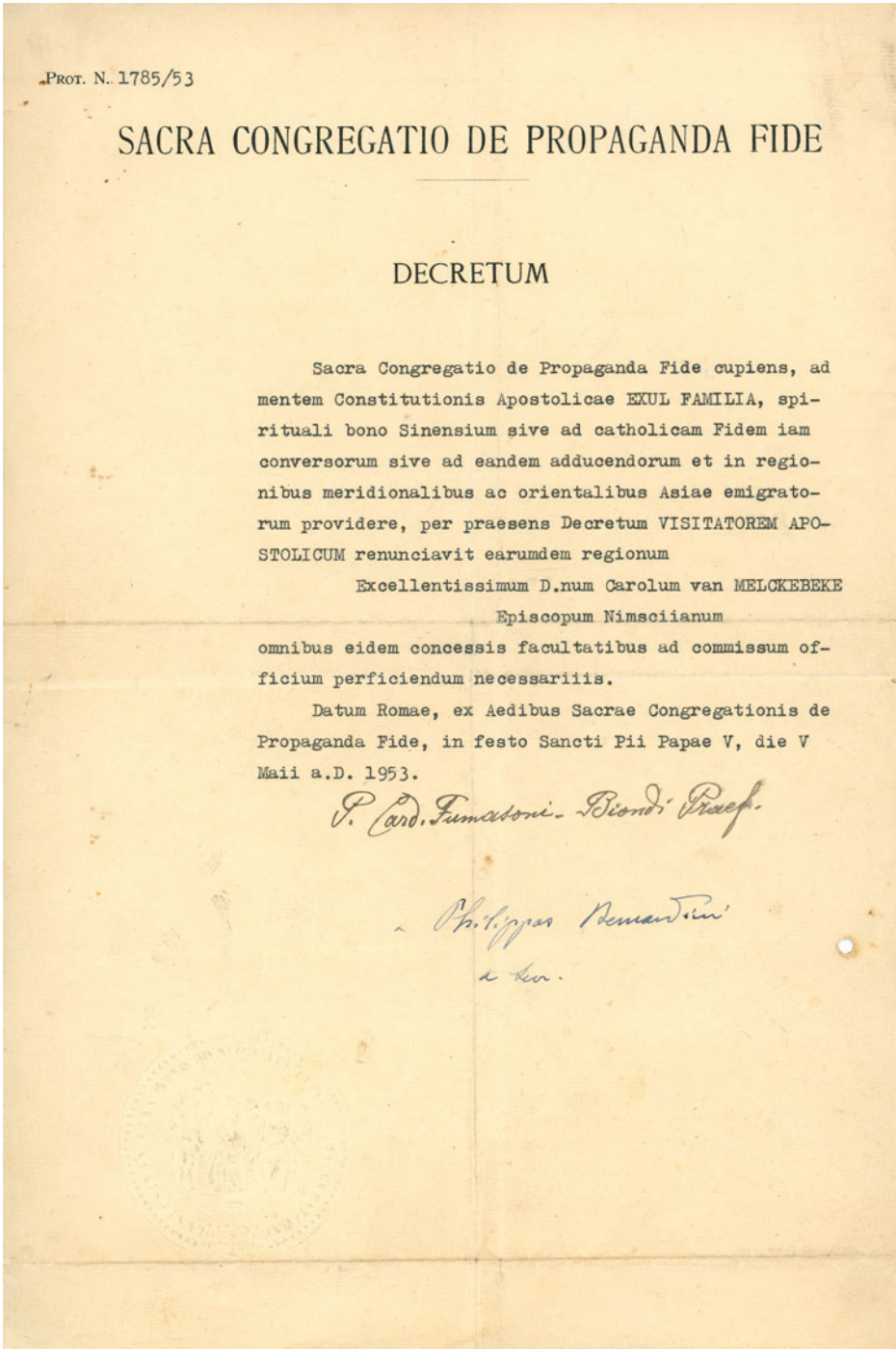


Figure 1. The decree of appointment of Bishop Van Melckebeke by the Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide, 5 May 1953.

Courtesy Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC-KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

and Eastern Asia, whether they are already converted to the Catholic faith, or that they still had to be brought there'.²⁴

Taylor queries the choice of Van Melckebeke as 'under-qualified' in terms of 'linguistic and cultural knowledge of diasporic communities' when compared with Catholic missionaries who had served in southern China, ancestral home of many overseas Chinese, or those who had long worked among overseas Chinese. He appraises the appointment of a Mandarin-speaking European bishop to direct the missionary work to Chinese who mostly spoke southern dialects as reflecting 'a very mainland China-focused understanding of the overseas Chinese for Rome', which echoes Joshua Sim's notion of religious nationalism. From a report by Van Melckebeke on his apostolate in 1963, Taylor quotes his view of the Chinese overseas as 'a single community that shared a direct link to China itself', representing the 'most widespread dispersion of human beings belonging to the largest national group in the whole world'.²⁵ Likewise, in a September 1957 interview Van Melckebeke described himself as 'no longer Belgian' but 'Chinese in every way except birth'. He was proud to see the Chinese overseas 'making their contributions to the world's culture' and 'retaining so much of their ancient heritage' at the same time. With his nostalgic love of China and its people, the bishop undertook his new mission to protect and strengthen the faith of the Chinese Catholic overseas, whom the Communists were trying to win over through appeals to nationalism.²⁶

Nevertheless, it is probably an overstatement to infer that Van Melckebeke viewed overseas Chinese Catholics as 'a community of believers whose main preoccupation was the defeat of communism on the Chinese mainland' and 'a parallel body of Catholics who apparently longed (as the Church itself did) for an eventual return to China'.²⁷ A document from the Office of Apostolic Visitor in March 1958 pointed out that the composition of the Chinese diaspora was 'multifaceted and complex', but that there were many common issues for the Catholic apostolate among them. The main efforts of the Apostolic Visitor, as defined in the document, was directed towards the Chinese who had 'established their lives in foreign countries, often for several generations, without any idea of returning permanently to China'.²⁸ In another interview dated March 1960, the bishop did express his hope that 'the resurrection of China will come through the overseas Chinese', citing the precedent of overseas Chinese being a driving force behind the 1911 Chinese Revolution that overthrew the Manchu Qing dynasty, but he maintained that the vast majority of overseas Chinese had no desire to return to China, however strong their cultural, linguistic and racial ties with the mother country.²⁹ Such an understanding was most likely

24 Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 'Directives', attachment to the 'Decretum', 5 May 1953, Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC-KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

25 Taylor, 'Visiting the "overseas Chinese"', pp. 157, 159.

26 Karl Bringmann, 'Bishop of exiled Chinese Catholics throughout world protects flocks from Reds', *NCWC News Service*, 16 Sept. 1957.

27 Taylor, 'Visiting the "overseas Chinese"', p. 159.

28 Bureau du Visiteur Apostolique, 'Positions Respectives de S.E.R. Mgr. Paul Yu Pin et du Visiteur Apostolique' [Respective positions of Archbishop Paul Yu Pin and the Apostolic Visitor], 5 Mar. 1958, Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC-KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

29 'Overseas Chinese hold Red regime "tragic but passing", Apostolic Visitor declares', *NCWC News Service*, 28 Mar. 1960.

developed after his fact-finding trips to overseas Chinese communities around the globe, one of his primary tasks after he was entrusted the special apostolate in 1953.

Singapore Catholic Central Bureau

With the consent of Archbishop Michel Olçomendy MEP (1901–77) of Malacca-Singapore, Bishop van Melckebeke decided to base his apostolate in Singapore, and establish the Office of Apostolic Visitor at 24 Nassim Road, in the Scheut Missions building (see [fig. 2](#)). The factors he considered were Singapore's advantages from its local church development, geographical location and culture—as well as the concentration of Chinese people and Chinese-language education.³⁰ In March 1954, he founded the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau (SCCB, *Tianzhujiao nanyang jiaowu chujin she*) and began work with three departments in the following year: the Chinese Catholic Press, the Library and Bookstore, and Religious Instruction by Correspondence. Thereafter, Archbishop Olçomendy approved his proposal to open an activity centre in the downtown area and donated a plot of land beside Saints Peter and Paul Church at 225 Queen Street, a place of worship built in 1870 for the Chinese and Tamil Catholic communities.³¹ A three-storey building was constructed in 1957.³²

The local Chinese Catholic community had been developing for a century and a half. The Catholic faith had been introduced to Singapore by Portuguese missionaries from Malacca and then by the French Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), with the latter establishing the first chapel and mission for Chinese Catholics in 1832. These Teochow and Hakka-speaking migrants, mostly emigrants from Guangdong province, laboured in the jungles and coastal dockyards of Singapore. With the indispensable assistance of Chinese catechists trained at the MEP seminary in Penang, the French missionaries 'found it easier to convert the Chinese when they were overseas than in China'.³³ It is interesting to see that the same phenomenon happened after 1949 with the global missionary work organised by Bishop van Melckebeke and his colleagues.

The SCCB was modelled on the structure of the former Catholic Central Bureau in Shanghai (1947–51), the national coordinating body of missionary, cultural, charitable and educational activities of the Catholic Church in China under the newly erected ecclesiastical hierarchy. Of the Shanghai CCB's ten departments, the most influential work had been the massive publication and distribution of books and pamphlets on apologetics by the Cultural Activities Department to counter Communist anti-religious propaganda, and the spreading of the Legion of Mary by the Lay Apostolate Department, which trained lay leaders to sustain Catholic communities in the absence of clergy. The Shanghai CCB was eventually shut down by the

30 Tong Li, 'Wang Shouli zhujiao fangtan' [Interview with Bishop van Melckebeke], *Hai Sing Pao*, 22 Oct. 1977; 'Tuidong huaren chuanjiao, zuji bian wudazhou' [Promote missionary work among Chinese, leave footprints on five continents], *Hai Sing Pao*, 11 Sept. 1980.

31 Clement Liew, 'A survey of the development of the Singapore Chinese Catholic mission in the 19th century', *BiblioAsia* 3, 4 (2008): 17.

32 Ren, 'Tushu shengwu bu nianwu zhounian jinian' [25th anniversary of the department of books and religious objects], *Hai Sing Pao*, 8 May 1980.

33 Liew, 'A survey', pp. 15–16.



Figure 2. Sketches of the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau and the Office of Apostolic Visitor on the back of a Christmas card (year unknown) signed by Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke and four Scheut missionaries in the Bureau. Courtesy Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC–KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5960.

Communist authorities in June 1951 on the charge of being ‘a reactionary organisation directly led and commanded by the imperialist Riberi’.³⁴ Archbishop Riberi reestablished the CCB in Taipei after he was expelled from China and moved the Internunciature to the capital of the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government in exile in October 1952.³⁵

With the assistance of several Scheut missionaries, all but one from the Ningxia diocese, the SCCB was gradually expanded into six departments, more fully described below: the Catholic Chinese Press, Library-Catechetical Service, Religious Instruction by Correspondence, Information and Coordination Centre, Assistance to the Apostolate among Overseas Chinese, and Union of Prayer for China and Religious Vocations. Bishop van Melckebeke described his fellow missionaries as witnesses to ‘the unshakeable fidelity of Chinese Catholics’ before their expulsion, who ‘aspired to continue their missionary work among the Chinese people spread all over the world’.³⁶ A few Chinese priests also joined the undertaking at his invitation.

The Catholic Chinese Press

The SCCB started its cultural apostolate (of spreading Christian values among the city population by modern communication means) with a tabloid-size Chinese biweekly newspaper, *Hai Sing Pao* (Star of the Sea), in April 1955 to ‘promote liaison among overseas Chinese, transmit papal instruction, introduce Catholic life around the world, and propagate religious teaching’. The circulation rose from the first issue’s 3,000 copies to reach its peak at 9,000 in 1961 around some 50 countries. The subscription then dropped by two-fifths, owing to the Indonesian government’s ban on the import of all kinds of Chinese-language publications.³⁷ After successive years of deficit, Bishop van Melckebeke decided to hand over the running of *Hai Sing Pao* to the Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia and Singapore in 1970. The editorial office was moved from Nassim Road to the SCCB premises to facilitate its development. Father Paul Tong Li (1927–2022) took over as editor-in-chief of *Hai Sing Pao* for the next 30 years.³⁸

There were two other Chinese periodicals that targeted different readers. *Lo Feng Pao* (The Joyful Vanguard), a pictorial magazine for teenagers and children, was published in Hong Kong first by the Institute of the Foreign Missions Sisters in 1968, and

34 ‘Shanghai junguanhui jieshou renmin yauqiu, mingling tianzhujiao jiaowu xiejin weiyuanhui, tingzhi yiqie huodong tinghou checha chuli’ [Shanghai Military Control Committee accepted the people’s demand to order the Catholic Central Bureau to stop all activities and wait for a thorough investigation], *People’s Daily* (Beijing), 16 June 1951.

35 More details about the CCBs in Shanghai and Taipei can be found in Bibiana Wong Yee-ying, *The short-lived Catholic Central Bureau: National catalyst for cultural apostolate in China (1947–1951)* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2021).

36 C. van Melckebeke, ‘Singapore–Hongkong’, *Missions de Scheut*, 1 (Jan.) 1956, p. 14.

37 In the early 1960s Indonesia had the largest Chinese population (2.29 million) in Southeast Asia, of whom 70,217 were Catholic, according to statistics compiled by Melckebeke’s office in 1961. Office of the Apostolic Visitor, ‘Quanqiu huaqiao renkou yu huaqiao jiaoyou renshu tongji’ [Statistics of global overseas Chinese population and the number of overseas Chinese Catholics], 20 Jan. 1961, *Sin Tuo Sheng* 34 (1 Mar. 1961): 43–4.

38 ‘Xinjiapo huawen wenhua chuanjiao shiye’ [Chinese-language cultural apostolate in Singapore], *Hai Sing Pao*, 24 July 1975; ‘Gonghe Haixingbao yinqing’ [Congratulations to *Hai Sing Pao*’s silver jubilee], *Hai Sing Pao*, 8 May 1980. In the early 2020s, *Hai Sing Pao* had a circulation of about 4,000.

then by the Salesians of Don Bosco, following the Sisters' withdrawal from the territory in 1971 (till the present). The SCCB took charge of its circulation to 50 countries: 12,200 in 1958. The *Sin Touo Sheng* (New *Vox Cleri*, Voice of the Clergy), a bimonthly journal for Chinese priests and seminarians sojourning abroad, was revived in September 1955 (*Vox Cleri* was originally issued by the Beijing archdiocese in the 1940s). The editor-in-chief was Monsignor Stanislaus Lo Kuang (1911–2004) in Rome.³⁹ Bishop van Melckebeke himself published the journal in Singapore—the circulation in 1958 was 825 copies—until Lo was appointed bishop of Tainan in 1961 and many young Chinese priests went to serve in Taiwan, when the journal was moved to the island in 1963 and reverted to its old title, *Vox Cleri*.⁴⁰

Library-Catechetical Service

Father Joseph Ting Chu-jen (1921–84), a priest from Jilin province who had worked in Kota Semarang, Indonesia, was invited by Bishop van Melckebeke to assist in making plans for the SCCB in 1956. A year later, he set up a Sino-English library with more than 7,000 books and subscriptions to some 30 newspaper and magazine titles, a reading room and an office on the first and second floors of the new building at Queen Street. Boys and girls from Catholic middle schools in the vicinity came every day, but when the National Library was opened at Stamford Road in 1960, the small Catholic library lost its custom. As a result, the SCCB switched its focus to supporting the organisation of libraries for Chinese Catholic communities around the world. In two decades, some 140 libraries on five continents were set up thanks to its sponsorship.

Sales at the bookstore on the ground floor of the SCCB premises sometimes reached as many as 40,000 Chinese books per year between 1959 and 1963, but was then greatly affected by external factors, such as the Indonesian government's import ban, political instability in Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War, and local churches' insufficient outreach among the Chinese communities.⁴¹ Figure 3 shows the sales of books from 1955 to 1979. The bookstore still operates today selling religious books and objects.

Religious instruction by correspondence

Father Marcel Wille CICM (1912–79), who arrived in Singapore in early 1954, advised the bishop to conduct a correspondence course on the Catholic catechism.⁴² After a year of preparation, Father Wille sent out the first lesson in English to the first

39 Lo Kuang was a native of Hengyang, Hunan province. He studied philosophy, theology and canon law at the Urban College in Rome. After becoming a priest in 1936, he taught Chinese philosophy at the college for 25 years, and served concurrently as ecclesiastical consultant of the Embassy of the Republic of China to the Holy See between 1943 and 1961. 'Luo Guang zongzhujiao jieshao' [An introduction to Archbishop Lo Kuang], website of *Fuda wenwu guan* [Museum of Fu Jen University], http://www2.mcsh.kh.edu.tw/resource/oc/happy_kids/f/fp/fp-5.htm (last accessed 12 Oct. 2021).

40 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', *Missions de Scheut*, 11 (Dec.) 1958, p. 45; 'Chinese-language cultural apostolate in Singapore', *Hai Sing Pao*, 24 July 1975; Paul Li Tong, 'Haiwai huawen jiaohui kanwu yilan' [Overview of overseas Chinese Church publications], 14 Oct. 2006, *Xinde bao* (Shijiazhuang), <https://www.xinde.org/show/45745> (last accessed 4 Aug. 2021).

41 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', p. 46; Ren, '25th anniversary of the department of books and religious objects', *Hai Sing Pao*, 8 May 1980.

42 A similar project run by the Shanghai Catholic Central Bureau had instructed thousands of unbelievers and strengthened the Catholic faithful who had lost contact with priests during the early years of the Chinese Communist regime.

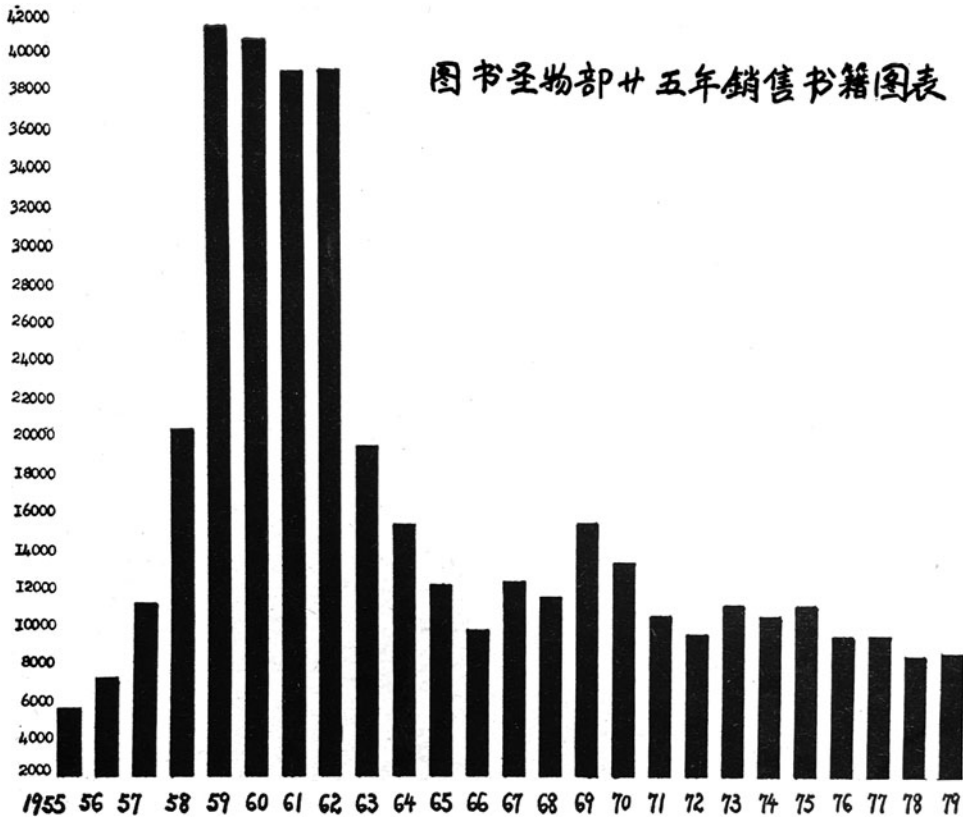


Figure 3. Sales figures of the SCCB bookstore, 1955–79

Reproduced with permission from Ren, '25th anniversary of the Department of Books and Religious Objects', *Hai Sing Pao*, 8 May 1980, special issue, p. 2.

subscribers in May 1955. A Chinese version was prepared and published in 1956 by Father Carlo Ly Tche-i (1924–2006), a diocesan priest of Ningxia who was invited by Van Melckebeke to come from Rome to Singapore. The year-long course offered 32 free lessons, each with a ten-page booklet and a questionnaire. Within a decade, the course was expanded to Catholic communities throughout Southeast Asia and also to Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney, Mauritius and Toamasina (Madagascar) in Indonesian, Tamil, Thai, Japanese, French, and Dutch.

The correspondence course was promoted through annual advertisements in secular newspapers. Surprisingly, they caught the attention of some Chinese readers given that efforts to spread the Catholic faith in the community generally met with a certain amount of apathy, especially in the cities. Of special note were advertisements published in two Chinese left-wing newspapers in Singapore that led to 700 new subscriptions, and can be credited with several hundred conversions and baptisms by 1958. In Cholon, in the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon, 300 students subscribed to the course following an advertisement in a daily newspaper.⁴³ When

43 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', pp. 46–7.

the course marked its silver jubilee in 1980, the number of subscriptions had surpassed 42,000 in Singapore and Malaysia alone, and nearly 16,000 of them (almost 40 per cent) were able to complete it. They received a certificate and were then introduced to priests for baptism or further religious instruction. After 25 years, the booklets were revised in accordance with the catechetical reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). At the same time, the Chinese text had to be adjusted to accommodate Southeast Asian subscribers with less proficiency in Chinese.⁴⁴

Information and Coordination Centre

To stay in touch with and understand issues facing Catholic missionary work among overseas Chinese, the liaison office headed by Father Antoon Schotte CICM (1905–80) maintained regular contact with 150 priest-correspondents sojourning in 52 countries, and had regional agencies in Rome, Jakarta, Manila, Cholon, and Hong Kong. Every issue of the bimonthly *Sin Touo Sheng* included a few pages of newsbriefs on recent developments in the lives of Chinese priests and their parish communities in different countries as a means of intercommunication; occasionally there was news about priests being arrested or killed in China.⁴⁵ Schotte also served as secretary to Bishop van Melckebeke (1958–60), and then spent the rest of his life establishing a new parish—the Holy Spirit Church at Upper Thomson Road, Singapore (1960–80).⁴⁶ He and the bishop, friends and co-workers for half a century, died merely 15 hours apart on 26 and 27 August 1980. Their coffins were placed side by side at the funeral Mass.⁴⁷

Assistance to the Apostolate among Overseas Chinese

Directed by Father Jeroom Deblauwe CICM (1909–78), this department allocated funds totalling 1.2 million dollars from 1955 to 1975 from Propaganda Fide and Catholic institutions in Europe and the United States to assist the establishment of Chinese parish churches, cultural centres, schools and seminaries.⁴⁸ For example in Cholon, with the largest settlement of Chinese in French Indochina since the late nineteenth century,⁴⁹ which had no previous Catholic community, two Chinese parishes with 4,000 Catholics, four schools and a Catholic Centre were established within a few years. In particular, a minor seminary exclusively for young Chinese

44 Ibid., pp. 44–5; Zhong, ‘Jiaoyi hanshou nianwu zhounian’ [25th anniversary of the religious instruction by correspondence], *Hai Sing Pao*, 8 May 1980; Zhang Bigang, ‘Jiaoyi hanshou huigu yu qianzhan’ [Religious instruction by correspondence looking back and forward], *Hai Sing Pao*, 22 May 1980.

45 This section disappeared after the journal’s office was moved to Taiwan.

46 Melckebeke, ‘Singapore–Hongkong’, p. 15; Van Overmeire, *Elenchus of CICM*, p. 439.

47 ‘Wang Shouli zhujiao Shi Houde shenfu xiangji shishi’ [Bishop van Melckebeke and Father Schotte pass away on successive days], *Hai Sing Pao*, 11 Sept. 1980.

48 No indication of currency in the report. In any case the Singapore dollar’s exchange rate against the US dollar was about 2.5 in 1975. ‘Nanyang jiaowu chujin she qing chengli ershi zhounian’ [Singapore Catholic Central Bureau celebrates 20th anniversary of establishment], *Hai Sing Pao*, 29 May 1975; ‘Singapore exchange rate against USD’, CEIC Data, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/singapore/exchange-rate-against-usd> (last accessed 8 Oct. 2021).

49 Jonathan Rigg, ‘Exclusion and embeddedness: The Chinese in Thailand and Vietnam’, in *The Chinese diaspora: Space, place, mobility, and identity*, ed. Laurence J.C. Ma and Carolyn Cartier (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 106.

men was set up in October 1959, to which Bishop van Melckebeke paid much attention and visited several times to show his support for the seminarians.⁵⁰

Union of Prayer for China and religious vocations

Father Deblauwe also organised the Prayer Union for the Catholic Church in China (40,000 prayer sheets distributed as of 1958), and provided material assistance to about 30 dioceses. In 1953, Father Jozef Vanhalst CICM (1903–77) conducted a survey among Chinese clergy in exile, which was then kept up to date by Father Georges Dopchie CICM (1916–87), who also directed a campaign for priestly vocations among Chinese youth (103,000 prayer sheets distributed as of 1956).⁵¹

The survey of the Chinese clergy in exile enabled Bishop van Melckebeke to expand the overseas Chinese apostolate by distributing priestly manpower in Chinese circles in different countries. Most of these priests were once seminarians who had been sent from China to continue their studies in philosophy and theology. On the eve of the regime change, the Holy See demanded all clergy remain at their posts, while permitting the evacuation of non-essential missionary personnel, such as hundreds of seminarians and novices.⁵² Six major seminaries were organised—in Macau, Hong Kong, Penang and Genoa (Italy), with two in the Philippines—to welcome Chinese seminarians at that critical time.

In 1953, there were 250 Chinese priests living outside China and about 300 Chinese seminarians studying in major seminaries abroad who were expected to enter the priesthood within five years. In other words, approximately 500 Chinese priests would be available for the apostolate.⁵³ Father Paul Tong, from Tianjin, recalled that some of those who had completed their priestly formation at the seminary had no choice but to resume secular life, because they were not accepted by local bishops.⁵⁴ The resettlement of these displaced Chinese priests, therefore, became an urgent task for Propaganda Fide through the office of the Apostolic Visitor.

Bishop van Melckebeke made a series of trips to Southeast Asia within a five-year period to investigate the needs, difficulties and progress of the apostolate on one hand, and ask local bishops to accept Chinese priests in exile to specialise in the pastoral care of their compatriots on the other.⁵⁵ He travelled as far as South Africa, Madagascar, Réunion Island and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁶ As a result, with

50 Paul Pang, 'Peng Baolu zichuan' [Autobiography of Paul Pang] (2009), chap. 14, *Chinese OFM Online*, <http://www.ofm.org.hk/500-ofmTW/520-friars/friars-bio/PQRST/pang-paul/index-paul-pang-autobio-4.htm> (last accessed 4 Aug. 2021); 'Wang Shouli zhujiao shengping nianbiao' [Chronicles of Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke], *Hai Sing Pao*, 11 Sept. 1980.

51 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', p. 46; Melckebeke, 'Singapore–Hongkong', pp. 14–15.

52 Lo Yu and Wu Yan, ed., *Zhongguo dalu tianzhujiao sishinan dashiji 1945–1986* [Forty years of history of Catholicism in mainland China] (Taipei: Fu Jen University Press, 1986), p. 7.

53 'Belgian bishop named to organise far-flung apostolate among refugees from Red China', *NCWC News Service*, 11 May 1953; 'Chuanxinbu weiren Wang zhujiao wei dongnan yazhou shichayuan' [The Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide appoints Bishop van Melckebeke as Visitor to Southeast Asia], *Kung Kao Po* (Hong Kong), 24 May 1953.

54 Tong Li, 'Tui'er buxui Wang zhujiao' [Bishop van Melckebeke retires without rest], *Hai Sing Pao*, 27 Oct. 1977.

55 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', pp. 44–5; Father Paul Tong Li, interview by the author, 17 Mar. 2018, Church of the Sacred Heart, Singapore.

56 Pang, 'Autobiography of Paul Pang', chap. 14.

the recommendation of the Apostolic Visitor, newly ordained Chinese priests who graduated in Europe and the United States were able to start their ministry in dioceses that embraced a relatively large ethnic Chinese population. Subsequently, many Chinese parishes and schools were established around the world during the 1960s.⁵⁷

One result of his extensive travel and data collection over five years was a 12-page statistical review of overseas Chinese Catholic communities published in *Sin Touo Sheng* in March 1961. It revealed that the total number of Catholic converts was 363,756, accounting for 2.7 per cent of an estimated 13.4 million overseas Chinese in five continents (not including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau). The majority of the Chinese Catholic population, or 76 per cent (276,862), lived in Asia—in which the largest concentrations were in Indonesia (70,217), the Philippines (57,629), Singapore (46,548), Malaya (39,251) and Thailand (29,336). The rest were distributed as follows: 36,586 in Central and South America, 9,273 in North America, 22,175 in Africa (mostly on the East African islands), 16,555 in Oceania, and 2,305 in Europe.⁵⁸

The main apostolic effort, as the bishop reported, had been focused on Catholic schools attended by Chinese children, which aimed to inject Catholic thought into Chinese culture.⁵⁹ From 1953 to 1969, it was reported that the number of Chinese Catholic schools had grown from 36 to 100 around the world.⁶⁰ According to statistics from 1961, these schools enrolled 52,686 students (about 87 per cent of whom were in Asia). The proportion of Catholics among their alumni was 48 per cent in Asia, 46 per cent in Africa, 30 per cent in the Americas, and 6.8 per cent in Europe. Meanwhile, there were 461 priests serving in 214 Chinese parishes worldwide.⁶¹

Recent statistics compiled by scholars put the global Chinese overseas population at 11.3 million in 1960 with 96 per cent living in Asia. There was a slight decline in the overseas Chinese population between 1955 and 1960, probably because of the difficulty of emigrating from China after the establishment of the Communist regime, the independence movements in Southeast Asia, and the Cold War. The number of Chinese living outside China grew steadily in the following decades.⁶²

Political agenda of the Apostolate to the Chinese Overseas?

Various sources show that there was a general expectation in and outside the Church that the mission of Bishop van Melckebeke would form a crucial part of the spiritual defence against Communist infiltration into countries neighbouring China. An example was a report on the Holy See's assignment of a Chinese bishop from northern China, Job Chen Qiming CM (1891–1959), to care for overseas Chinese, published in *Kung Kao Po* in July 1953. During his visit to Rome earlier that month, the 62-year-old bishop had submitted his opinion on the organisation of missionary work among the Chinese overseas in light of his experience, including

57 Tong, 'Bishop van Melckebeke retires without rest', *Hai Sing Pao*.

58 Office of the Apostolic Visitor, 'Statistics of global overseas Chinese population', pp. 42–53.

59 Melckebeke, 'Singapore–Hongkong', p. 14; 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', pp. 44–6.

60 Joseph Motte, *History of the Catholic Church in China*, trans. Joseph Tarc Hou (Taipei: Kuangchi Cultural Group, 1971), p. 174.

61 Office of the Apostolic Visitor, 'Statistics of global overseas Chinese population', p. 53.

62 Peter S. Li and Eva Xiaoling Li, 'The Chinese overseas population', in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese diaspora*, ed. Tan Chee-beng (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 20–21.

a few years in Hong Kong, working among refugees from China after he was forced to flee his diocese with his priests and seminarians.⁶³ The report described how the new appointment was greeted with rejoicing by the congregations. In view of the brutal oppression taking place in Communist China, the report explained, such an apostolate to propagate Christianity among the Chinese overseas would 'raise their vigilance and hold together their spiritual strength' against the evils of communism.⁶⁴ Even though Bishop Chen did not take up the job immediately because of his physical health,⁶⁵ we can infer that Chinese Catholics had the same reaction to Van Melckebeke's appointment.

In the dossiers of the Belgian bishop in the CICM archives, a memorandum by the Secretary of the British Legation to the Holy See to Propaganda Fide in February 1952 stated that the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia were 'a very vital target' in the campaign against communism. In the struggle for the hearts and minds of the overseas Chinese, it noted, 'missionary effort, particularly that associated with education and welfare work, can play a most vital role'. It proposed using exiled missionary manpower to exploit this opportunity:

With the closure of the gates of China to missionary work, and with the expanding opportunities for missionary work among the millions of Chinese living in South East Asia outside China, there is a great need and a great, though possibly passing opportunity to redirect the river of missionary effort which previously flowed into China towards this new field.

The memorandum suggested the creation of a bishopric with a coordinating authority covering the whole of Southeast Asia to divert the flow of missionary effort into the new field. A central point, possibly Hong Kong or Singapore, would be suitable for his operation, from which he could 'keep his finger on the pulse of missionary effort and political tension throughout an area which at the moment is of great importance to

63 Bishop Chen moved from the Zhengding diocese in Hebei province to southwestern China in 1947, and subsequently to Hong Kong in 1949. Church life suffered great harassment when the Nationalist and Communist armies fought one another around Zhengding and other cities of strategic importance in northern China.

64 'Jiaoting zhushi Huaqiao chuanjiao gongzuo, wei Chen zhujiao tuidong haiwai jiaowu' [The Holy See attaches importance to missionary work among Chinese residing abroad, appoints Bishop Chen to promote the overseas apostolate], *Kung Kao Po*, 12 July 1953.

65 Bishop Chen barely survived a car accident in Saigon en route from Hong Kong to Europe. Bishop van Melckebeke had a long conversation with him in Leuven a day after the news was published. In his memo attached to the newspaper clipping, he noted that Bishop Chen 'seemed to ignore this appointment', which had not been discussed during their conversation. Bishop Chen eventually went to Sao Paulo, Brazil, to work among Chinese immigrants in 1956. Although he died three years later, several of his priests continued to run a Chinese parish and a school with 400 students, and provide a medical and healthcare service for the 4,000 Chinese living in the vicinity of the church compound. Note by Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke attached to news clipping of *Kung Kao Po*, 12 July 1953, Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC-KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224; 'Huigu fuwu huaren lichen, Baxi jinian Zhongguo shenfu de Ba wushi zhounian' [Looking back at the history of service to the Chinese, Brazil commemorates the 50th anniversary of the arrival of Chinese priests], *Huasheng Bao* (Beijing), 3 July 2006, <http://www.chinaqw.com/news/2006/0703/68/34851.shtml> (last accessed 2 Aug. 2021).

the whole non-communist and Christian world'.⁶⁶ It was issued in the very month that General Sir Gerald Templer (1898–1979), High Commissioner and Director of Operations of Malaya (1952–54), arrived in Kuala Lumpur to assume his office.

In the wake of the Second World War, the United Kingdom maintained a protectorate over the Federation of Malaya until 1957, and colonial rule of Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo until 1963.⁶⁷ Templer was appointed to Malaya to deal with the Malayan Emergency after the previous British High Commissioner was murdered by Communist rebels in October 1951.⁶⁸ Templer sought the political and economic development of Malaya to win over the hearts and minds of the racially divided Malayan community and unite the people against the insurrection, as he believed that it could not be overcome by military measures alone.⁶⁹

Another note from the British Legation in September 1952 mentioned that the support of various Protestant missionary societies with China experience had been obtained, but it conveyed Templer's desire that 'the Catholic Church should also play an important part' in this campaign for moral and material regeneration among the Chinese overseas.⁷⁰ A third note sent to Propaganda Fide in the following month touched on the immigration policy towards Chinese missionary workers, who could be admitted to Malaya only after each individual had been vouched for by appropriate church authorities and vetted by security authorities, as immigration from China was strictly limited at that time, while Europeans would be admitted freely. It also promised financial aid from the government to missionary bodies engaged in educational and medical work among ethnic Chinese.⁷¹

The proposal to the Holy See communicated by the British ambassador 'quickly bogged down'. Templer was told that Rome would not do much until 'they hear from their man in Malacca', meanwhile the French MEP missionaries seemed to lack enthusiasm for the proposal. This was probably compounded by their difficulties with the English language. The idea of establishing a special bishopric also faced resistance from local Church authorities. Roxborough cited correspondence from the British Colonial Office, dated 12 May 1953:

I understand the Bishop's appointment is encountering opposition from Bishop of Malacca and Internuncio in Indonesia both of whom resent encroachment on traditional preserves of Paris Foreign Missions. Bishop will therefore be faced with a delicate task. I

66 Secretary of the British Legation to the Holy See, 'Protocollo' to Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide, Feb. 1952, Archiefscheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC–KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

67 Leon Comber, *Templer and the road to Malayan independence* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), p. 19.

68 Comber, *Templer*, p. 1; Carolyn Cartier, 'Diaspora and social restructuring in postcolonial Malaysia', in Ma and Cartier, *The Chinese diaspora*, p. 81.

69 Comber, *Templer and the road to Malayan independence*, p. 53; 'Gerald Templer: The smiling tiger', website of National Army Museum (London), <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/gerald-templer-smiling-tiger> (last accessed 5 Aug. 2021).

70 British Legation to the Holy See, excerpt from memorandum to Propaganda Fide, 6 Sept. 1952, Archiefscheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC–KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

71 British Legation to the Holy See, excerpt from memorandum to Propaganda Fide, 3 Oct. 1952, Archiefscheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC–KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

understand that he will probably not wish to have too close contact with civil authorities for fear of being accused of playing politics.⁷²

Eventually it was agreed that an Apostolic Visitor be appointed to investigate and report. Bishop van Melckebeke, who arrived in Singapore in August 1953, was said to be ‘extremely cautious about any government contacts whatever’.⁷³

Besides the situation in Malaya, the Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide was obviously conscious of the political sensitivity that the role of Apostolic Visitor might be tainted with in other parts of Asia under the tense atmosphere of the Cold War. Its directives to Bishop van Melckebeke cautioned against the pro-Kuomintang position of many Chinese priests. While dedicating themselves to the apostolate to the Chinese overseas, the directives pointed out, the priests felt that it was ‘important on the political field to promote the Formosa (Taiwan) government, with which they hope to return to China’.⁷⁴

Although the document did not single out anybody by name, we can relate this point to pro-Kuomintang Chinese Catholic leaders such as Archbishop Paul Yu Pin (later cardinal, 1901–78) of Nanjing, who had been forced into exile in the United States because he was wanted by the Communists as a ‘war criminal’, and who was forbidden by Pope Pius XII from moving to Taiwan for fear of provoking further persecution of Catholics in China. From 1937 to 1945, Yu had helped the wartime Kuomintang government with civil diplomacy by touring various cities in Europe and the United States to meet with political leaders and give talks encouraging Chinese communities to lobby support for China against the invasion of Japan.⁷⁵ He was famous as an outspoken critic of atheistic communism.

In a letter to Yu Pin dated July 1952, Rome-based Monsignor Stanislaus Lo proposed Yu as the best candidate to organise all Chinese clergy living outside of China in the service of the Chinese diaspora. A copy of the letter, written in Italian, was extremely likely to have been sent to some Holy See officials.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the pope’s final choice was Bishop van Melckebeke, apparently because Yu’s status was politically sensitive. Received by Cardinal Francis Spellman (1889–1967), archbishop of New York, Archbishop Yu established the Sino-American Amity Association and the Chinese Catholic Information Centre in New York City with the help of three Chinese priests to take care of Chinese students and intellectuals after 1952, and the Free Pacific Institute in 1955 to promote international solidarity against communism.⁷⁷ It was not until 1959, after the death of Pius XII, that Yu was able to reside in Taipei to direct the reestablishment of Fu Jen Catholic University.

72 CO 1022, SEA 307/3/02, no. 62, 12 May 1953, quoted from John Roxborough, ‘The Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia to 1990’, in *Christianity in West Malaysia, a denominational history*, ed. Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing and John Roxborough (Selangor: Pelanduk, 1992), p. 13.

73 Roxborough, ‘The Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia’, p. 13.

74 Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, ‘Obstacles du point de vue des Prêtres Chinois’ [Obstacles from the point of view of the Chinese Priests], attachment to the ‘Decretum’, 5 May 1953, Archieff Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC–KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

75 Chen Fang-chung, *Yu Bin shuji zhuan* [Biography of Cardinal Yu Pin] (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 2001), pp. 43–69.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

77 Chen, *Biography of Cardinal Yu Pin*, pp. 161–79; ‘Rev. Paul Chan’, in *A memorial collection of Rev. Paul Chan, S.T.S., J.C.D.*, ed. Wang Qingyu, Anne Huang and Chen Benmei (2017), n.p.

In his own words, Bishop van Melckebeke affirmed that the Catholic missionary effort among overseas Chinese had become more urgent as a result of the decline of colonial influence in Southeast Asian countries. He also pointed to the increasingly vital role of the Church in the context of the Cold War, as the People's Republic of China was active on the global level and its cultural influence was growing.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he was well aware that his ministry should avoid direct involvement in politics. In a confidential document in March 1958, he distinguished his position of Apostolic Visitor from that of Archbishop Yu, a close friend of President Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), who had 'played an important political role in China in favour of the Church'. Bishop van Melckebeke made clear that his apostolate remained 'outside strictly political questions and tendencies', and the constructive action of Apostolic Visitor left 'behind the negative form of anti-communist propaganda'. *Hai Sing Pao*, for instance, when compared with other periodicals by Catholic priests or laypersons who had had a narrow escape from the Chinese Communists published in Hong Kong and elsewhere around that time, was not a typical anti-communist publication. Instead, the Chinese biweekly carried articles on a life of faith, biblical and theological knowledge, Church history, Catholic liturgy and devotions as spiritual food 'clearly designed to counter the attraction of communism to diasporic Chinese readers'.⁷⁹

Another significant point of difference was that the SCCB was aimed at ethnic Chinese who had lived outside of China 'often for several generations, without any idea of returning permanently to China', while the Chinese Catholic Information Bureau set up by Yu Pin had a special interest in supporting overseas Chinese students and Chinese communities exiled from their homeland following the advent of Communist rule. Since their apostolates were positioned differently, Bishop van Melckebeke noted, his office and Yu undertook common work from time to time, while remaining completely independent from each other.⁸⁰

Results, succession and subsequent development

Bishop van Melckebeke is remembered as a thrifty man, but one who was warm-hearted and generous to anyone in need, regardless of their religious belief.⁸¹ Always smoking a pipe, the honest and simple bishop had a great love for China, as mentioned, so much so that he was sometimes used by the ambitious for disingenuous purposes.⁸² Nevertheless, he accomplished an unprecedented, borderless mission spanning 25 years of painstaking effort. Clusters of coloured pins on a large world map in his office indicated concentrations of Chinese Catholics, whom he described as his parishioners all over the globe (see [fig. 4](#)).⁸³ From the beginning, the scope of his apostolate exceeded the borders of Southeast Asia and extended to Chinese communities established on five continents, with the exception of the 'Chinese territories'

78 'L'apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise', pp. 44–5.

79 Taylor, 'Visiting the "overseas Chinese"', pp. 162–3.

80 Bureau du Visiteur Apostolique, 'Positions Respectives de S.E.R. Mgr. Paul Yu Pin et du Visiteur Apostolique', 5 Mar. 1958.

81 Father Paul Pang, interview by the author, 21 July 2021, Franciscan House, Taishan, New Taipei City; Xiaowei, 'Xiang nin—Wang Shouli zhujiao' [Thinking of you—Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke], *Hai Sing Pao*, 13 Aug. 1981.

82 Tong, 'Bishop van Melckebeke retires without rest', *Hai Sing Pao*.

83 Bringmann, 'Bishop of exiled Chinese Catholics throughout world protects flocks from Reds'.

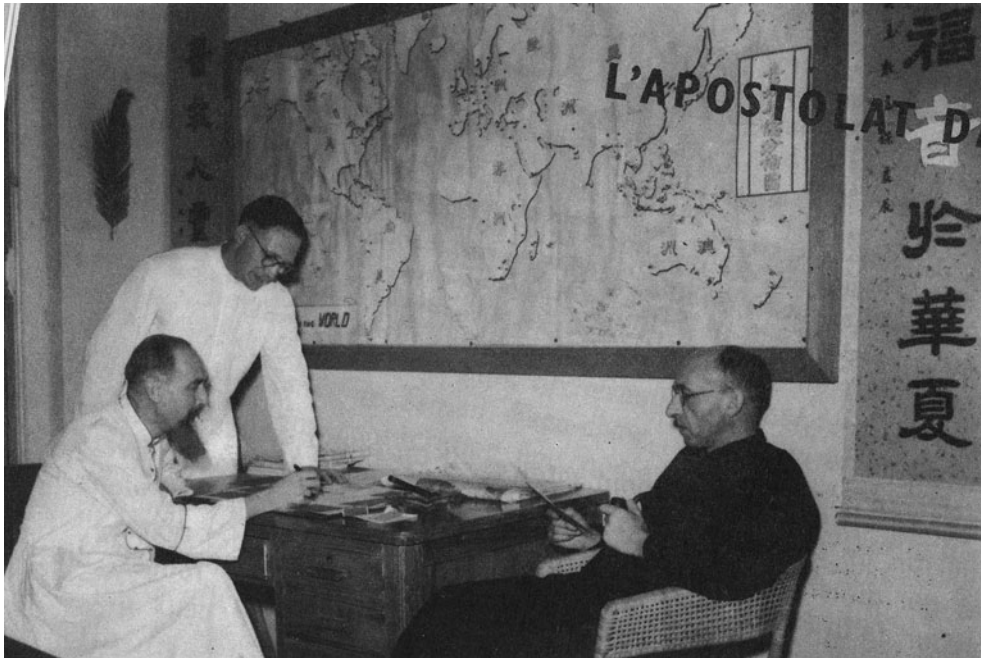


Figure 4. Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke (seated left) at the Office of Apostolic Visitor, accompanied by Fathers Deblauwe and Wille

Missions de Scheut, 11 (Dec.) 1958, p. 44, reproduced with permission.

of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, which were placed under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Internuncio in Taipei. The extension, approved by Propaganda Fide, was 'due to the Chinese overseas presence being a multifaceted and complex affair with many problems common to all facets of the Catholic apostolate'.⁸⁴

Although the approach of the overseas Chinese apostolate varied from country to country, it yielded positive results in general. The growth rate of the Catholic population among overseas Chinese surpassed that of the total overseas Chinese population over the same period (see [table 1](#)). In 1969, there were 747,000 overseas Chinese Catholics in some 50 countries, accounting for 4.9 per cent of the overseas Chinese population, which had increased to a total ranging from 15 to 25 million over the years.⁸⁵ This proportion was only second to that of Hong Kong.⁸⁶ The percentage of Catholics among the total population in mainland China had never

84 Bureau du Visiteur Apostolique, 'Positions Respectives de S.E.R. Mgr. Paul Yu Pin et du Visiteur Apostolique', 5 Mar. 1958.

85 Peter S. Li and Eva Xiaoling Li estimate the overseas Chinese population in 1970 at 15,098,000, whereas the Office of Apostolic Visitor estimates it at 25 million. Li and Li, 'The Chinese overseas population', *Routledge handbook of the Chinese diaspora*, p. 20; 'Pope urges prayers for church in China', *NCWC News Service*, 15 June 1977.

86 In 1969 there were 241,813 Catholics in Hong Kong (the majority being Chinese). 'Statistics of the Diocese of Hong Kong, from 30 Sept. 1968 to 1 Oct. 1969', Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives, <https://www.archives1841.hk/Statistic/1969-C.htm> (last accessed 4 May 2020).

Table 1: The proportion of Catholics among the Chinese population outside mainland China, 1969–70

1969–70	Total population	No. of Catholics	Percentage of Chinese Catholics (%)
Hong Kong	3.86 million	241,813	6.3
Taiwan	15.4 million	294,000	1.9
Macau	248,636	41,000	1.6
Other Chinese overseas	15–25 million	747,000	2.9–4.9

Sources: Data for Hong Kong: Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives, <https://www.archives1841.hk/Statistic/1969-C.htm>; for Taiwan: ‘Lici pucha gaiyao biao’ [Summary table of all previous censuses], Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C. (Taiwan), <https://www.dgbas.gov.tw/public/Attachment/5327111072FZJFA2L.pdf>; for Macau: the 1970 census of Macau, and ‘Pope urges prayers for church in China’, *NCWC News Service*, 15 June 1977; for the Chinese overseas: Li and Li, ‘The Chinese overseas population’, *Routledge handbook of the Chinese diaspora*, p. 20.

exceeded 0.5.⁸⁷ In countries with a Christian tradition such as Mauritius and the Philippines,⁸⁸ the proportion of baptised Chinese was higher.⁸⁹ In Taiwan, when the number of Catholics increased to its highest peak—about 300,000 in 1969—following mass conversions of refugees from the mainland and aboriginal people in the mountains, its ratio to the insular population was merely 2 per cent.⁹⁰ The number of conversions is a concrete quantitative assessment of the achievement of the Catholic apostolate to the overseas Chinese, but is definitely not sufficient to evaluate its impact on intangible and uncountable aspects such as cultural cultivation, identity building, social support and cohesion among the Chinese, who are often an ethnic minority in their host countries.

Regarding the allocation of young Chinese clergy unable to return to their homeland, Bishop van Melckebeke reported in 1960 that about 30 ordained within the previous two years left Europe to serve in Taiwan, bringing the total number of Chinese priests on the island to 153. Of the Chinese priests abroad, 109 were in Southeast Asia, 52 in the Americas—29 in the United States, 6 in Canada, and the remainder in Central and South America. The largest number resided in Europe, 145 in total, of whom about one-third were pursuing higher studies in Rome, Belgium or elsewhere.

87 Motte, *History of the Catholic Church in China*, p. 175.

88 The conversion of Chinese Filipinos to Catholicism began in the 17th century under the Spanish colonial government’s carrot-and-stick policy. In 1953, the ministry was entrusted to Bishop Juan Bautista Velasco Díaz O.P. (1911–85), a Spanish Dominican missionary who was expelled from his diocese of Xiamen (Fujian province, China) and moved to Manila. He organised about 100 Chinese priests and missionaries from China to serve a network of Chinese parishes, mission stations and schools in the Philippines. He was appointed auxiliary bishop of Manila in 1955, and retired in 1984. ‘L’apostolat dans la diaspora chinoise’, p. 46.

89 Charbonnier, ‘Les Chinois de la diaspora’, *Études*, p. 24.

90 The estimated population of Taiwan was 14 million according to the 1970 Census. ‘Lici pucha gaiyao biao’ [Summary table of all previous censuses], Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C. (Taiwan), <https://www.dgbas.gov.tw/public/Attachment/5327111072FZJFA2L.pdf> (last accessed 4 May 2020); Chao Chung-wei, Beatrice K.F. Leung and Bibiana Y.Y. Wong, eds, *The Catholic Church in Taiwan*, vol. 1 (Taipei: Kuangchi Cultural Group, 2020), p. 3.

The majority of them were secular priests, namely not attached to a monastery or missionary society (or group).⁹¹ New Chinese missions were therefore founded on the five continents by Chinese priests and, as mentioned above, dramatic conversion movements have been reported since then.

During the Singapore Colloquium on the Overseas Chinese Apostolate in Southeast Asia convened by Bishop van Melckebeke in September 1976, however, participants had reservations in their assessment of the apostolate's attainments despite the growth in numbers. As Taylor quotes from the colloquium proceedings from the CICM archives in Rome, the representatives from different countries were not optimistic about challenges posed by geopolitical conflicts, and antagonistic policies towards the ethnic Chinese population:⁹²

Attendees lamented the fact that Vietnam—the site of one of the region's preeminent overseas Chinese seminaries—had fallen to communism; evangelisation in Indonesia had come to a standstill due to anti-Chinese policies in that country (and disapproval of attempts to minister to overseas Chinese by sections of the Church hierarchy itself); in the Philippines, 'Filipinisation' and a lack of local Chinese Catholics choosing to join the priesthood meant that 'the Catholic faith has not yet deeply penetrated the Catholic Chinese'; and even in those societies that had once seemed as amenable to the notion of an 'overseas Chinese Catholicism' (e.g. Singapore), representatives bemoaned what they saw as a shift towards 'materialism', a 'lack of faith' amongst the youth, and restrictions on Chinese Catholic education.

The colloquium was said to pave the way for Van Melckebeke to step down from the role of Apostolic Visitor to overseas Chinese and the handing over of the ministry to the Chinese clergy.⁹³ In view of his ailing health, he requested the Holy See to allow him to retire from the office of Apostolic Visitor at the age of 79 in September 1977.⁹⁴ He had suffered brain damage and was in a coma for a few days following a car accident near Saigon airport in March 1975, and had to spend the last few years of his life in a wheelchair after a fall from a staircase at his residence in February 1976.⁹⁵ He

91 Ivar S. McGrath, 'Chinese priests seen returning to Formosa', *Catholic Standard and Times*, 19 Aug. 1960.

92 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was only able to access an incomplete collection of *Hai Sing Pao* from 1975 onwards and *Sin Tjou Sheng* bimonthly from 1955–61. Hence I am unable to discuss the challenges faced by the Chinese Catholic communities in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia during and after the Second Indochina War (1955–75). Sporadic reports on post-1975 persecution of Christians in these Communist states appeared in *Hai Sing Pao*. A report in February 1980 revealed that a majority (at least 73 per cent) of the Vietnamese 'boat people' were ethnic Chinese, to whom the apostolate among overseas Chinese would extend its pastoral care. 'Haiwai huaqiao liqu shiying, yi chengwei qiaojudi gongmin' [Overseas Chinese strive to adaptation in order to become citizens of their host countries], *Hai Sing Pao*, 18 Feb. 1980.

93 Taylor, 'Visiting the "overseas Chinese"', pp. 164–5.

94 D.S. Lourdasamy to Carlo van Melckebeke, 22 Sept. 1977 (Rome), Prot. 4120/77; Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 'Decretum', 26 Sept. 1977, Prot. 4296/77, Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC-KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

95 'Chronicles of Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke', *Hai Sing Pao*, 11 Sept. 1980; 'Wang Shouli zhujiao xianzai kangfu zhong' [Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke is now recovering], *Hai Sing Pao*, 4 Mar. 1976; Xiaowei, 'Thinking of you—Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke', *Hai Sing Pao*.

nominated Archbishop Peter Chung Wan-ting (b. 1928) of Kuching,⁹⁶ Malaysia, as his successor, and accepted the latter's invitation to be his adviser.⁹⁷ Father Joseph Ting served as Deputy Apostolic Visitor and director of the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau. Three years later, however, Archbishop Chung decided to resign from the post of Apostolic Visitor, as he could no longer administer both the apostolate to the Chinese overseas and his episcopal ministry to the local Church.⁹⁸

After the resignation of Archbishop Chung, the Holy See decided to centralise the overseas Chinese apostolate by moving its administration to Rome. In 1981, Father Paul Pang Baolu OFM (b. 1932), a Guangdong-born Franciscan priest teaching at the Pontifical Urban University (Urbaniana) and director of its Centre of Chinese Culture, was appointed by Propaganda Fide as the director of the Office for the Promotion of the Overseas Chinese Apostolate, in Rome. As a result, the apostolate among overseas Chinese came under the direct administration of Propaganda Fide, and Father Pang remembered that its prefect, Brazilian Cardinal Angelo Rossi (1913–95), had followed his mission with keen interest. Father Pang travelled to almost every part of the world, as far as South Africa, where Chinese Catholic communities exist. In 2007, the office had to cease operations following his retirement, because the Holy See could not find a new director after a three-year search. The pastoral care of Chinese Catholics was then entrusted to local bishops.⁹⁹

Meanwhile in Singapore, after Bishop van Melckebeke's retirement, the SCCB was also taken over by Chinese clergy. Following Father Joseph Ting's sudden death in Rome in May 1984,¹⁰⁰ Fathers Pang Yaohua (1923–89)¹⁰¹ and Paul Tong became successive directors of the SCCB.¹⁰² They were among the first of about a dozen young Chinese priests who came to Singapore after 1949.¹⁰³ Father Tong, the last surviving member of this group of priests, for example, was sent from Tianjin to receive a theological education at the Urban College (before it was elevated

96 Archbishop Chung is a native of Hubei province in China. He studied at the seminary in Macau, and was ordained a priest of Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia, in 1954. Between 1963 and 1966 he studied in Rome and obtained a doctorate in canon law. He was appointed auxiliary bishop of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, in September 1970, and subsequently bishop of Kuching in March 1975. 'Chong Wanting rongying Gujin zongzhujiao' [Chung Wan-ting elevated to archbishop of Kuching], *Hai Sing Pao*, 8 July 1976.

97 Peter Chung to C. van Melckebeke, 20 Oct. 1977 (Singapore); C. van Melckebeke to Peter Chung, 21 Oct. 1977 (Singapore), Archief Scheutisten – Generaalat, KADOC–KU Leuven, BE/942855/1262/5224.

98 Pang, 'Autobiography of Paul Pang', chap. 14; 'Pang Baolu shenfu bei wei huaren chuanjiao chu zhuren' [Father Paul Pang appointed director of the Office for the Promotion of the Overseas Chinese Apostolate], *Hai Sing Pao*, 31 Dec. 1981.

99 Father Paul Pang, interview by the author.

100 'Ding Shuren mengxi zai Luoma juren shishi' [Monsignor Ting Chu-jeu died suddenly in Rome], *Hai Sing Pao*, 29 May 1984.

101 Father Pang Yaohua was a cousin of Father Ting and also from Jilin province. He fled to Hong Kong in 1949 and then studied philosophy in Manila and theology in Montreal, Canada. Ordained a priest in 1957, he worked in New York for a year and then was invited by Archbishop Olcomendy to Singapore in 1958. 'Peng Yaohua shefu jinduo yinxi' [Father Pang Yaohua celebrates silver jubilee of priestly ordination], *Hai Sing Pao*, 17 July 1982.

102 Father Paul Tong, interview by the author.

103 Xiao Yonglun and He Guozhang, 'Xinjiapo huawen jiaowu' [Apostolate to Chinese-speaking Catholics in Singapore], *Witness Blog*, http://verbiestfoundation.org/edcontent_d.php?lang=tw&tb=6&id=4155 (last accessed 7 Aug. 2021).

to a pontifical university in 1962) in Rome in 1950, and then studied sociology at Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium. As he could not return to China, he went to Singapore to start his priestly ministry in 1958.¹⁰⁴

During the 1950s and 1960s, the number of converts among Chinese Singaporeans increased significantly. A variety of Catholic associations were established, including the Legion of Mary, Young Christian Workers and Marriage Encounter, to maintain the vigour of the Chinese Catholic community. Upon the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, they began celebrating Mass and studying the Bible in the Chinese language, which led to a fuller religious flowering. However, because English-speaking Catholics greatly outnumbered them, the participation and representation of Chinese-speaking Catholics in archdiocesan affairs as a whole was miniscule. So in July 1984, the archdiocese set up the Commission for the Apostolate of Mandarin-Speaking to meet the pastoral needs of the expanding Chinese Catholic community, after a survey by the archdiocese found that the Chinese-speaking Catholics are of different economy and culture type from the English-speaking Catholics and recommending the formation of a special commission to care for religious life of the Chinese-speaking Catholics, who were minority groups scattered across several parishes.¹⁰⁵

The SCCB maintained its functions as the Catholic bookstore and editorial office of *Hai Sing Pao*, which still serves as the Chinese-language archdiocesan newspaper.¹⁰⁶ In January 1996, during Father Tong's tenure, the SCCB registered itself with the Singapore government under the Charities Act, and was renamed the Carlo Catholic Society (*Shouli she*).¹⁰⁷ Tong, who had also served as chief editor of *Hai Sing Pao* (1970–2000), recalled that the SCCB had not been legally registered for forty years, until one day in 1995 when he wanted to open a bank account for the Bureau and was refused, because it had no 'number'. Therefore, he submitted an application to the government, giving the names of at least ten members and stating the property it owned. 'The registration officer doubted I could call it a bureau of Singapore as it was only a simple three-storey building,' Tong said, 'So he suggested to change the name into "Catholic Society". I agreed and added "Carlo" in the front.' He explained to the officer that it was to commemorate 'a rich man called Carlo van Melckebeke' who had paid for the building. The procedure was unexpectedly loose, and the name 'Carlo Catholic Society' quickly appeared in the gazette. He believed the reason was that the government welcomed the registration of civic organisations, such as Chinese kinship associations (*huiquan*), which had been established and managed themselves for more than a century in Singapore before its independence in 1965.¹⁰⁸

104 Father Paul Tong, interview by the author; 'Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke, CICM', *History of the Catholic Church in Singapore: The virtual exhibition*, <https://history.catholic.sg/bishop-carlo-van-melckebeke-cicm/> (last accessed 17 May 2023).

105 'Xinjiapo zongjiaoku fabiao huawen jiaowu diaocha baogaoshu' [The Singapore archdiocese publishes survey report on the apostolate of the Chinese-speaking Catholics], *Hai Sing Pao*, 12 June 1984; Yen Hsiu-ching, 'Dong Li shenfu tan shicheng huaren jiaowu' [Father Paul Tong talks about the apostolate for the Chinese in Singapore], *Shantao Catholic Weekly*, 13 May 2001; Xiao and He, 'Apostolate to Chinese-speaking Catholics in Singapore', *Witness Blog*.

106 'Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke, CICM'.

107 'About us', Carlo Catholic Society, <https://carlo.org.sg/about-us/> (last accessed 4 Aug. 2021).

108 Father Paul Tong, interview by the author.

Conclusion

The roles of both the Apostolic Visitor to the Chinese overseas and the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau have faded from the contemporary history of Chinese Catholicism. This may be seen as a positive result of the maturation of overseas Chinese Catholic communities, which have become more self-sufficient. In the wake of China's reopening in the 1980s, many overseas Chinese Catholics have taken up a new missionary endeavour, visiting their hometowns in mainland China and bringing news about the life of the universal church after the Second Vatican Council. Research and exchange centres have been set up in Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, America and Europe to encourage overseas Chinese Catholics to share their faith with people in China, despite official restrictions on mainland Catholics in communicating with foreign countries and the Holy See.¹⁰⁹

This article is merely a preliminary study on the complex and extensive subject of the history of Catholic missionary work among the Chinese overseas, with a special focus on the pioneering and leading role played by Bishop Carlo van Melckebeke. The author acknowledges the limitations of this study considering the lack of archival material from the Sacred Congregation for Propaganda Fide (renamed Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples in 1967 and abolished in 2022), as well as her incomprehension of Flemish Dutch, which was used in many documents, and much correspondence contained in the archival dossiers of the Belgian bishop. Future research will need to be supplemented by some fieldwork and oral history interviews to fill gaps in our knowledge of the characteristics and development of Chinese Catholic communities in different countries.

As scholars point out, the size and geographic distribution of the overseas Chinese population have changed significantly in recent decades. Its total number in the early 2020s is estimated at more than 40 million, scattered across some 130 countries. The proportional share of Asia is still the largest, but this has dropped continuously to about 70 per cent, while North America, Europe and Oceania have recorded substantial increases. This demographic shift has been fuelled by suspicion, hostility and discriminatory policies towards ethnic Chinese in some Southeast Asian countries on the one hand, and the abolition of immigration restrictions in multicultural and polyethnic countries like Canada and the United States since the 1960s, as well as Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s, as a way of easing labour shortages in professional and technical jobs on the other. The end of China's international isolation and the recent uncertain political prospects of Taiwan and Hong Kong have also fostered emigration to these countries.¹¹⁰ The influence of the expanding and changing composition of the overseas Chinese population on Catholic missionary work in host countries is worthy of further research. A comparative study of the diasporic Chinese Protestant networks may portray a fuller picture as well.

109 Charbonnier, 'Les Chinois de la diaspora', *Études*, p. 25.

110 Li and Li, 'The Chinese overseas population', *Routledge handbook of the Chinese diaspora*, pp. 20–25; Laurence J.C. Ma, 'Space, place, and transnationalism in the Chinese diaspora', in Ma and Cartier, *The Chinese diaspora*, p. 19.