

# Changing Church and State Relations in Contemporary China: The Case of Mindong Diocese, Fujian Province\*

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## Abstract

This study examines church–state relations in Mindong diocese, Fujian province, from the perspective of state–society relations. The article seeks to identify the salient patterns of church–state relations in Mindong diocese, and the social factors that contribute to the formation of such patterns. I elaborate on the essential characteristics of the Mindong model in the paper. I argue that the three key factors affecting church–state relations in Mindong diocese are the competition between the open and underground churches, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of local government officials. I describe the Mindong model as a “negotiated resistance,” meaning that the underground church resists the control of the government and seeks organizational autonomy through continued negotiation with officials of the government. In conclusion, I discuss the implications of this church–state model in advancing religious freedom in Chinese society.

**Keywords:** Catholic church; church–state relations; Mindong; negotiated resistance; religious freedom; China

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For my research project on church–state relations in mainland China, I travelled to Fujian to conduct fieldwork in Mindong 闽东 diocese (*jiaoqu* 教区) in May 2007.<sup>1</sup> On arrival in Fu’an 福安 city, I called a taxi, gave the driver the address of a local Catholic church and asked him to take me there. It was an open Catholic church, and its address had been given to me in Hong Kong. The driver replied: “No Catholic church there.” I was surprised, having thought that most locals would at least be familiar with the shape of a church and therefore know its general location. I then asked the driver to take me to a Catholic church close to the first address I had requested. The taxi driver thought for a while then

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<sup>1</sup> Charbonnier 2008, 525–27.

took me to a majestic Catholic church in the city. Inside the church I met a nun and asked her how I could find a specific priest, giving her the name. She looked at me strangely before answering, “Are you looking for the open church?” Having realized I had made a mistake, I apologized and left the church, which did not look to me at all like an underground Catholic church. I came to realize later that an open church did exist at the specific location I told the taxi driver. However, the building was surrounded and hidden from view by shops, and as a result most locals were unaware there was a Catholic church in the city centre. It seemed very odd that an underground church should be so well known in a mainland Chinese city, raising the question: did the local people not know that the church was an “illegal” religious building?

Another thought-provoking experience during my 2007 fieldwork occurred when I attempted to find an underground Catholic church in Luojiang 罗江 county. Prior to the trip, I had been under the impression that an underground church in the county would be similar to many of the local buildings, in order not to stand out. Instead, I found a lofty church built on a hillside. Many Catholics were praying and working inside and outside the church, and next to the church was the local bishop’s office. On the left of the bishop’s office, a modern multi-purpose hall was under construction. This was an underground church, but visible for all to see. More questions were raised: how was it possible that so-called “illegal” priests were able to take part in their religious activities as freely and openly as those in the “legal” open church? Why were the clergy from the underground church able to work so openly in the bishop’s office and why had the government not acted against them?

The case of the Mindong diocese is a good reminder to researchers that it is unwise to make sweeping conclusions about the patterns of church–state relations, because they vary from region to region and diocese to diocese. What researchers should do is to identify major patterns from different dioceses, building models that are useful to understand similar patterns of church–state relations among dioceses.

The Mindong diocese case also shows the importance of fieldwork, which reveals the differences between the church described in papers and reports and the church in reality. One simply cannot explain why the underground Catholic church in Mindong can freely organize religious activities, if the underground church is considered as “illegal” according to the law and religious policies of China. Researching the Catholic church in China through papers, books and news articles alone, one could conclude that the power of the state was all-consuming, and thereby neglect the reality on the ground: that church members can act as agents who resist the government’s policies and shape the patterns of church–state relations.

This paper examines church–state relations in contemporary China from the perspective of state and society relations, seeking to identify the salient pattern of church–state relations in Mindong diocese and the social factors that contribute to its formation. In the following, I provide a historical and contemporary

account of Mindong diocese, and explicate the Mindong model of church–state relations. I then explain the key factors contributing to the formation of the Mindong model. In conclusion, I discuss the implications of this church–state model in advancing religious freedom in Chinese society.

### **Data and Methods**

This is a qualitative research project utilizing fieldwork to collect data. The reason for using this approach is that the study of the Catholic church in China continues to be very sensitive. Fieldwork allows the researcher to conduct research on various Catholic dioceses in a flexible way, by meeting and interviewing priests and the laity from both the open and underground churches.

The research subject of this paper, the Catholic church of Mindong diocese, is one of the four dioceses in my on-going research project on the Catholic Church in mainland China. The other three dioceses include Wenzhou 温州 diocese in Zhejiang province, Cangzhou 沧州 diocese in Hebei province and Fengxiang 凤翔 diocese in Shaanxi province. Geographically, these four dioceses are located in the southern, eastern, northern and western parts of China respectively, and the church–state patterns are unique to each one. The differences between Mindong diocese and other three dioceses are that in Mindong diocese there is a pattern of strong underground church and weak open church, whereas in Cangzhou diocese there is a strong open church and a weak underground church, in Wenzhou diocese the open and underground church are equal in power, and in Fengxiang diocese there is only open church and no underground church. These dioceses represent four different models of church–state relations in mainland China. It is my intention to show that together they illustrate realistically that there are multiple models of church–state relations in contemporary China.

I conducted fieldwork in Mindong diocese on two separate occasions. The first trip was from May to June in 2007, during which I visited six parishes and met and interviewed a total of 12 people, including Catholic priests and laity in both the open and underground churches. The different perspectives of the priests and laity in both the open and underground churches on certain events and issues were useful in confirming the information gathered and understanding the complexity of the related issues. The second trip was conducted in December 2008. The purpose of that fieldwork was to conduct further in-depth interviews and to validate the information gathered in the first trip. In the second interview, I shared with the interviewees my preliminary research findings, and listened to their feedback. To ensure their safety, I concealed their identities and titles in this paper.

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

There are four Catholic dioceses in Fujian province, namely, Mindong diocese, Fuzhou 福州 diocese, Minbei 闽北 diocese and Xiamen 厦门 diocese. The

Mindong diocese is located in the north-eastern part of Fujian. According to the *Guide to the Catholic Church in China 2008*, the total Catholic population of the four dioceses was approximately 210,000.<sup>2</sup>

In the 17th century, the Spanish Dominicans arrived in Mindong and started to preach to the Chinese community. In 1926, the Holy See created the Funing Apostolic Vicariate (*Funing daimuqu* 福宁代牧区) from Fuzhou diocese, and the new vicariate was directed by Archbishop Theodore Labrador Fraile. In 1946, the Holy See changed the status of the Funing Apostolic Vicariate to Funing diocese (*Funing jiaoqu* 福宁教区), and the new diocese was led by Bishop Thomas Niu. In 1948, Funing diocese was renamed Mindong diocese. There are many historic church buildings in Mindong, including the City Catholic Church in Fu'an (*Fu'an chengguan bentang* 福安城关本堂, 1631), the Xidong Catholic Church (*Xidong bentang* 溪东本堂, 1631), the Kangcuo Catholic Church (*Kangcuo bentang* 康厝本堂, 1640), the Ningde Lankou Catholic Church (*Ningde Lankou bentang* 宁德岚口本堂, 1640), and the Qitou Catholic Church (*Qitou bentang* 岐头本堂, 1770). The famous Chinese Rites Controversy in the 17th and 18th centuries took place in Dingtou 顶头 village in Fu'an city.

There are nine counties in Mindong diocese, which has a total of 32 parishes. Most of the Chinese Catholics live in Fu'an City, Ningde and Xiapu 霞浦. Mindong diocese has approximately 80,000 Catholics. The underground church consists of almost 70,000 Catholics, and has a bishop, 45 priests, 88 nuns and 400 lay catechists. The open church has fewer than 10,000 Catholics, with an official patriotic bishop, not recognized by the pope, leading about five priests in the diocese.

The essential characteristics of the Mindong model can be described as follows:

- the underground church is stronger than the open church, and their priests take the lead in the religious affairs of the diocese;
- recognized by the government, the open church has legal status, however, the church is weak and somewhat neglected by the local government;
- the underground and open churches compete and yet cooperate;
- although the underground church is considered “illegal,” the priests are able to negotiate with the local government to seek compromises;
- the local government allows the underground church to celebrate mass and organize religious activities. The buildings of the underground church are legally registered.

This is done via a group of Catholic laity who are members of the management committee of the church. The management committee is the registered owner, not the clergy. In legal terms, the status of the priests who perform religious rituals in the church is still considered “illegal,” but the local government is tolerant. In this kind of ambiguous situation the underground church is thriving.

2 Charbonnier 2008, 517.

## Church and State Relations in Mindong Diocese

Compared to other Catholic dioceses in China, Mindong diocese is unique in its high level of religious freedom and positive interaction with the government. The competition between the open and underground churches, the mediating role of the Vatican and the pragmatism of the local government are three key factors contributing to the church–state model in Mindong. I shall give a brief account of these factors, and then provide my analysis in detail.<sup>3</sup>

In most Catholic dioceses in China the open and the underground churches co-exist and compete with each other. They compete for legitimacy through the recognition of bishops by the Vatican, in order to gain the support of the Catholic laity and opportunities for church growth. Richard Madsen argues that “there is no longer a stark division between an underground church whose primary religious loyalty is to the Pope and an official church whose primary loyalty is to the Chinese government.”<sup>4</sup> This assertion is based on the grounds that many bishops who preside over the open church have been quietly approved by the Vatican. According to my fieldwork in four dioceses, both the open and underground church bishops in Cangzhou and Wenzhou diocese have received “pontifical mandates,” but their competition has never ceased. To suggest that the division between the open and underground bishops could be removed by their both receiving “pontifical mandates” underestimates their conflict over organization and power. In Mindong, the underground church is leading the competition and has the bargaining power to negotiate with the local government.

The Vatican has influence over the Catholic church in China by playing a mediating role. Generally speaking, the influence of the pope on the church occurs through two different channels: first, through the doctrine of the church and its canon law; second, through various directives issued by the Vatican regarding the Catholic church in China. Whether the open or underground churches obtain legitimacy is highly dependent on these two conditions. However, the Vatican is not able to fully influence the political stance of the clergy in China, many of whom have their own interpretation of political reality. In Mindong diocese, the bishop of the underground church is recognized by the Vatican and enjoys the overwhelming support of the Catholic laity in the region.

The attitude of the government is essential to the survival and development of the church. The Chinese government controls the Catholic church through the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). However, the CCPA refuses to recognize the authority of the pope over the running of the Catholic church in China and as a result the bishops of the open church have often been rejected by the Vatican. This has helped the bishops and the priests of the underground church obtain legitimacy from the pope. In addition, the local government has

3 Fuller discussion of these factors can be found in Chan and Lam 2002.

4 Madsen 2003a, 275.

its own way of dealing with the central government regarding the implementation of religious policy. The pragmatism of the local government has allowed the underground church the flexibility it needs to survive and grow. In Mindong, the local government is willing to give way to the underground priests, negotiating with them over grey areas of policy and allowing them to organize religious activities.

In the following section, I shall explain how these three key factors contribute to the Mindong model of church–state relations.

### *Competition between the open and underground churches*

Similar to other Catholic dioceses in China, the church in Mindong was reinvigorated around 1978 and 1979, when the Cultural Revolution finally ended. One priest who served the church during that time was Zhang Shizhi 张实之. Zhang became the official diocesan bishop in 1985, when he assumed the position of director of the CCPA in Mindong diocese. Zhang led a group of young priests and took responsibility for religious affairs until he passed away in 2005.

A young student named Zhan Silu 詹思禄 in the underground seminary was willing to join the open church. Later, Zhan received theological education and graduated from the Sheshan Seminary (*Sheshan shenzhe xueyuan* 佘山神哲学院) in Shanghai. He was to be appointed an auxiliary bishop in 2000 by the CCPA. However, the Vatican did not approve his appointment. As a result, Zhan's position was considered illegitimate by the Catholic community in Mindong and the open church was largely sidelined.

The rise of the underground church posed a challenge to the open church. Priests released from prison at the end of the Cultural Revolution returned to Mindong where they secretly celebrated mass on Sundays and organized the underground church. As the Catholic community grew steadily, the underground priests proposed that Father Ye Ershi 叶而适 lead the churches in Fujian. In 1978, the underground church provided training for lay catechists, and in 1980 received young men as students into an underground seminary. The conditions of study for these young men were poor, and they often had to go into hiding because the government constantly searched for and arrested them.

In 1984, the underground church invited a underground bishop from Tianshui 天水 diocese in Gansu province to consecrate a bishop and to ordain three priests, using the special power granted to the underground bishop by the pope. The name of the new bishop was Xie Shiguang 谢仕光, and the priests were Zhu Ruci 朱如慈, Guo Xijing 郭希景 and Liu Guangpin 刘光品. Since then, Zhu, Guo and Liu have become the leaders of the underground church in Mindong. Between 1984 and 1987 the underground church ordained 28 young men to the priesthood.

In 1988, the underground church developed even further to become a well-organized Catholic diocese. In that year, a synod of the clergy was held where the diocesan chancellor, procurator and the rector of the seminary were elected.

In addition, a council of priests, a board of diocesan consultors and a financial committee were also established. The Mindong diocese was divided into five deaneries and 25 parishes. Father Zhu Ruci published a document entitled: “Temporary Rules on Work and Life of Priests in Mindong diocese,” in which he outlined the duties and salary of the clergy. Since then the diocese has adopted a system of monthly pay.

After the synod, the underground priests decided to come out of hiding and organize religious activities more openly. They began to move into old church buildings, celebrating mass and the sacraments for lay Catholics. If the church buildings were occupied by priests of the open church, such as in the parishes in Fu’an, MUYANG 穆阳 and Dingtou, the underground priests would find other premises to work in parallel with the open church in the same area. In competition, the underground church won support from the laity. As mentioned above, the Catholic population of the underground church reached 70,000 out of 80,000 total Catholics in 2007.

The imbalance between the numbers in the underground and the open churches had a direct effect on the power relationship of the churches. The huge population of the underground church implied a source of financial support and social force in the region. The legitimacy granted by the pope added further strength to the underground church. The pattern of power relations in Mindong diocese could be described as “strong underground church and weak open church.” The underground church was *de facto* the body making decisions on religious affairs and leading the development of the diocese. For example, the underground church built and renovated nearly 100 church buildings from 1994 to 2007. The resources of the underground church were abundant, including donations from the Catholic community, volunteer architects (who were also lay Catholics) who assisted in designing the church, and building materials sold by lay Catholics to the church for very reasonable prices. The open church did not possess these resources.

Nevertheless, the open church had a unique power the underground church lacked, that is, the legal status granted by the Chinese government. This status enabled the open church to relate to the underground church, and it sought to build a relationship of limited collaboration. For example, the Chinese government issued a policy in 2003 stipulating that the building of churches needed the approval from an open-church bishop; with his consent the church could start the application process through various government bodies. Without the consent of the “open” bishop and proper documents from other government bodies, construction work could be stopped or the church building could be demolished by the government. Hence, the underground church needed to secure the support of Bishop Zhan Silu for the building of churches. Specifically, the church needed Zhan’s signature with his stamp on any application form, indicating his approval of the construction plan. Zhan adopted a supportive attitude, giving his consent to the requests of the underground church since 2003. In this way, the underground and the open church have had a mixed relationship of competition, negotiation and collaboration.

*The mediating role of the Vatican*

The Vatican is another source of influence on church–state relations in Mindong diocese. The pope’s influence works through two channels: firstly, the Catholic faith and canon law, and secondly, papal directives issued to the Catholic church in China on particular subjects. The “mediating role” of the Vatican referred to here is indirect rather than direct.

One of the key issues affecting relations between the Catholic church and the Chinese government is the status of the CCPA. In the political context of mainland China, the CCPA is a government-controlled organization aimed at promoting “the principle of independence” and encouraging Catholics “to take the management of churches in their own hands” (hereafter “the principle of independence”). To put this slogan in the Chinese context, it means that the Catholic church in China should cut ties with the Vatican and the pope, and on its own elect and appoint bishops without regard to the pope (“self-election and self-consecration” hereafter). However, these two principles are in conflict with the Catholic faith and canon law. It is stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “This is the sole Church of Christ, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (Paragraph 3, Part One).<sup>5</sup> In this profession, the two keywords “one” and “apostolic” affirm the position of the pope. The *Code of Canon Law* also explicates the Catholic hierarchy and the position of pope in it (Article 331, Volume 2).<sup>6</sup> It is stated that the person who “consecrates someone a bishop without a pontifical mandate and the person who receives the consecration from him incur a *latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See” (Article 1382, Volume 6).<sup>7</sup>

Directives issued by the Vatican to the Catholic church in China over the past five decades have been a key factor influencing the development of the underground church in Mindong. These directives include instructions issued in the 1950s, 1978 and 1981, and the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China.”<sup>8</sup>

The instruction issued in 1981 stemmed from the renowned underground church leader, Bishop Fan Xueyin 范学淹 of Baoding 保定 diocese, Hebei province. To arrange a successor for the diocese, Bishop Fan chose three young priests and conducted a secretive ordination without notifying the pope. Because the Catholic church in China during that time was in a critical situation, the pope approved Fan’s consecration of a new bishop. Ever since, secretive ordination and consecration have become a regular practice. Underground churches in many Catholic dioceses maintain their organizational strength through secretive ordinations.

5 Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2003a.

6 The line is quoted as follows: “The bishop of the Roman Church, in whom continues the office given by the Lord uniquely to Peter, the first of the Apostles, and to be transmitted to his successors, is the head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ, and the pastor of the universal Church on earth. By virtue of his office he possesses supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power in the Church, which he is always able to exercise freely.” Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2003b.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Lam 1997, 22–23, 126–28, 172–76.



The “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China,” issued by Cardinal Josef Tomko in 1988, stated clearly what position Catholic priests should take towards the policy of “self-election and self-consecration” advocated by the CCPA. Put simply, the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China” emphasizes that the status of the pope is a key aspect of the Catholic faith. Since the CCPA denies the position of the pope, it is against the Catholic church and Catholics should not follow what it says. It stresses that “self-election and self-consecration” without the approval of the pope is considered illegitimate, and those who conduct or accept the consecration would be subject to “*latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See” according to the *Code of Canon Law*.

The above quotations show the political choices Catholics in China face when deciding whether to join the “open” or “underground” churches. Those who follow the CCPA should recognize the supremacy of the Chinese government on religious matters, while those who follow the underground church should uphold the supremacy of the pope and the faith of the church. Zhan Silu of the open church chose to accept the authority of the CCPA in regards to the “self-election and self-consecration” of bishops – an authority not approved by the pope. The result was that Zhan and the open church lost the legitimacy granted by the pope. Although the underground church and the open church have developed a kind of limited collaboration, the underground church never cooperates with the open church at religious rituals. Specifically, the underground priests never celebrate mass and the sacraments with priests of the open church, and they also disapprove of lay Catholics attending mass in the open church.<sup>9</sup>

By affirming the Catholic faith and authority of the pope, the underground church has been granted legitimacy by the Vatican. The Catholic faith and canon law provide strong impetus to resist the arguments of the government position. In my fieldwork, the interviewees of the underground church talked about their dialogue with the government officials. One member of the senior clergy said that he was asked to receive education on law and ordinance in prison. In class, he insisted that the Catholic church has its own traditions that the government should respect. He recalled a conversation with government officials in which he said: “The government has certain demands (on certain) matters, but if these demands conflict with the doctrine, teachings and canon law of the church, we will not follow them.”<sup>10</sup>

Another senior clergy member recalled a similar dialogue in a meeting in which government officials demanded that “citizens are obliged to obey the law,” implying that priests are also citizens and therefore they should not support the underground church, as this is against the law. The priests replied:

9 According to Richard Madsen (2003b, 168), in some places underground and official priests live together, share church buildings and even participate in religious services together. The case of Mindong diocese is not the same as that described by Madsen.

10 Interviewee 1, Mindong, 4 June 2007.

There are two ways to follow the law. We do not deny the principle of law in society. But we are also Catholics. If the law of society is in conflict with our faith and our conscience, we are obliged to obey the law passively. If the government disagrees, they could arrest us. We will take it.<sup>11</sup>

The conversation above shows that the reasons given for resisting the government are based on faith and the priests' loyalty to canon law, from which they have developed their own understanding of the responsibilities of a citizen, such as: to obey the law actively (*zhudong shoufa* 主动守法) and to obey the law passively (*beidong shoufa* 被动守法). In regard to any laws that do not violate the Catholic faith and canon law, the clergy are obliged to obey them. As for those laws that conflict with the Catholic faith and canon law, the priests are not obliged to obey them. It shows that the underground priests have developed their own understanding of citizenship and the idea of civil disobedience from the Catholic faith and canon law.

In Mindong diocese, secretive ordination has become an effective way of increasing the numbers of priests. The underground church began to take students into a seminary in the 1980s. During that time, many students received only primary education before they entered the seminary. The seminary lacked resources and teachers, and the students often had to flee arrest while receiving their theological education. Notwithstanding, the first and second batch of students were ordained as priests after three years. In this way, the underground church could produce a group of faithful Catholic priests in a short period of time.

Secretive ordination was also an effective way to increase manpower when the government arrested and imprisoned priests. In 1984, Bishop Xie Shiguang and Father Liu Guangpin were arrested when the government issued another crackdown on the underground church. The leaders of the underground church consulted all the priests in a special meeting and resolved to consecrate Father Huang Shoucheng 黄守诚 as bishop of the diocese, so that he could lead the underground church. In 1985, the underground church asked Liu Shuhe 刘树和 from Yixian 易县 diocese in Hebei province to initiate the consecration. Later, the newly consecrated Bishop Huang Shoucheng ordained three more priests in order to replace those imprisoned by the government. During that time, there was a slogan in the underground church: "(The government) arrests one, (we) ordain two." The practice of secretive ordination was instrumental in producing clergy for the underground church.

"The Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China" is another important document strengthening the underground church. There were many meetings arranged between the underground clergy and government officials during the period 1988 to 1992. During these meetings, municipal, district and county government officials tried to persuade the clergy to accept "the principle of independence" and to support the CCPA on its policy of "self-selection and self-consecration of bishops."<sup>12</sup> The priests held firmly that they could not accept it,

11 Interviewee 2, Mindong, 5 June 2007.

12 I shall give an account of these meetings in the later paragraph "The pragmatism of the local government."

and their arguments were largely based on the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China.” This example shows again how papal directives partly form the basis for the underground church’s resistance to government control.

A question related to the Vatican and the Chinese church is whether the letter of the pope to the Chinese church in 2007 has changed church–state relations, particularly the competition between the open church and the underground church. One of the main themes in the pastoral letter was dialogue and reconciliation. The church should engage in constructive dialogue with the Chinese government, and the open and underground churches should seek reconciliation spiritually and institutionally.<sup>13</sup> Regarding the matter of dialogue, the underground clergy has been engaging in constructive dialogue with local government. The letter affirms their effort in this regard.

With regard to the matter of reconciliation, the letter has not brought immediate changes to the relationship between open and underground bishops since 2007. This assertion is based on the following observation: first, the open and the underground churches have not taken any move in institutional reconciliation; second, there is also no evidence of spiritual reconciliation. If celebrating a mass together could be seen as an indicator of spiritual reconciliation, the open and underground bishops have not done so. As suggested in the earlier paragraph, the clergy have their own way of interpreting the pope’s letter, seeking materials to support their political stance. I have found similar cases in my fieldwork in other Catholic dioceses comparable to Mindong. For example, although the open church bishop in Cangzhou diocese has the “pontifical mandates” conferred by the pope, the underground church bishop accuses him of holding a position in the CCPA by referring to the “Eight-Point Directive on Dealing with China.” In Wenzhou diocese, the then vicar-general Father Wang Yijun developed an alternative “CCPA” aimed at protecting the church from the control of the government. Such a model was approved by the Vatican. However, the underground church clergy kept questioning the model, challenging the grounds of the model by writing letters to the radio station of the Vatican.

### *The pragmatism of the local government*

The attitude of the government has been the third key factor affecting church–state relations. However, the so-called “government” consists of a hierarchy of power and multiple units with different functions. Moreover, in some cases the hierarchy and units differ and even contradict each other in their ways of dealing with problems. For example, the central government is responsible for making religious policy, and local governments are responsible for implementing religious policy. On the local government level, the units that deal with religious affairs are the united front work department, the department of religious affairs

13 Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2007.

and the public security bureau. It is interesting to note how the different government departments interrelate and coordinate. In my field work in the Mindong diocese, I found that a kind of pragmatism exists among the local government officials. These officials have not only changed their minds about the “religious problem” while interacting with the clergy, but many also have their own way of dealing with the underground church, which may be inconsistent with the religious policies issued by the central government.

In Mindong diocese, the open church is not a threat to social stability because it has only a small number of Catholics, and the department of religious affairs handles all problems of religious matters. However, the underground church is considered by the local government to be a potential threat to social stability because it has a huge population and organizes “illegal” religious activities. In accordance with information provided by the interviewees, I divided the process of interaction between the local government and the underground church into three different periods: confrontation, dialogue and compromise.

The period of confrontation covers the years from 1980 to 1990. From 1978 onwards, the underground priests celebrated mass secretly, recruited students in the underground seminary, established the bishop’s office and organized religious activities openly. The priests were regularly arrested and imprisoned by officers of the public security bureau. The years 1989 to 1990 saw the climax of this confrontation between the underground church and the government. On Christmas Eve 1989, a group of government and public security officials gathered around the church in Luojiang, intending to ban the priests from celebrating mass. Father Liu Guangpin, who was the priest-in-charge, insisted on celebrating mass, making Luojiang an exemplar of the underground church. Mass was celebrated right before the government officials and plainclothes public security police, who video-taped the whole event. On 27 July 1990, the public security police arrested 11 priests who were attending a regular meeting at the bishop’s office at Luojiang, including the bishop, the diocesan chancellor, the procurator and members of the board of diocesan consultors and finance committee. The charge against the underground church was organizing “illegal activities.” This is the often-quoted “event of 27 July” in the Mindong diocese. The arrest of underground clergy was widely reported by international media.<sup>14</sup>

The period of dialogue covers the years 1988 to 1992. In December 1988, the public security bureau sent a group of six officials to meet with the underground clergy: this was the beginning of dialogue. Government officials from other departments also began to take part in the dialogue. In March 1989, eight government officials from the department of religious affairs, united front work department and the public security bureau in Ningde and Fu’an met with the priests again. The third meeting was held in Ningde in August 1989, and was attended by municipal-, district- and county-level government officials. In these

14 “China: Four Fujian Underground Clerics Released after One-year Detention,” 1991.

talks, the government officials repeated their demands: that the underground church had to accept “the principle of independence” and the leadership of the Chinese Bishops Conference, and support the “self-election and self-consecration” of bishops. The priests stood firm in their refusal to accept the demands. In sum, the government officials and the priests simply reiterated their own positions at the meetings, and the result of dialogue was minimal.

After the “event of 27 July,” government officials continued to talk to the clergy in prison, trying to persuade them to submit to the CCPA, but their efforts yielded no result. All the priests were released after one and a half years. The final effort of the government officials to converse with the priests was at a “seminar” in Fu’an City in April 1992. The government sent more than 20 officials to attend the seminar, including high officials of the department of religious affairs in Fujian province and officials from the department of religious affairs, the united front work department and the public security bureau at the local level. The underground church sent 19 priests to take part in the seminar. However, the dialogue was still unable to resolve the conflict between “the principle of independence” and the principle of “papal primacy.” After the seminar, the local government organized a free tour of the open Catholic churches in Shanghai and Beijing, hoping that this would help change the minds of the priests. In the end, the tour was not successful.

It is noteworthy that the underground clergy had the chance to express their views before government officials during the period of dialogue. Their message was that it was not their intention to oppose the government but rather to hold their faith. They were willing to support the government in matters which did not violate the Catholic doctrines and canon law. They would not comply with the government if the matters contradicted the doctrine and law. This is the meaning of *zhudong shoufa* (to obey the law actively) and *beidong shoufa* (to obey the law passively). Thereafter, the clergy did act in support of the work of the local government. For example, whenever there was a natural disaster, the clergy would launch a campaign for donations in their parishes and deliver the money to the local government.<sup>15</sup> The dialogue between the government and the underground clergy yielded positive results in this respect, which changed the attitude of the government.

The period of compromise began in 1992 and continues until the present. The officials of the local government knew that they could never persuade the underground priests, and decided to look at new ways of handling the problem. I call this the “management” approach. The local government officials stated that they would allow the priests to run their religious activities freely, subject to the condition that they comply with certain rules. Among these early rules, first, the priests could not organize religious activities outside Ningde city; second, they

15 For example, the underground clergy launched a campaign of donation and collected 500,000 yuan after the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008. They delivered the money to the local government in the name of the Catholic church in Mindong diocese. See Cha Shenfu 2008.

should not talk about the differences between the open and underground churches; and third, they should not say anything against the government. Because these rules did not conflict with their faith, the priests responded positively. The local government added other rules in the years that followed.

As described above, the local government officials attempted to force the underground clergy to comply with their demands, using persuasion and imprisonment among other methods. When they tried in vain to coerce the underground clergy, they had only a handful of options, including banning the underground church and putting the clergy in jail, or accepting the existence of the underground church yet weakening their influence in the region. With regard to the first option, the local government did try this and was proven ineffective. On the one hand, the underground church had its own way of increasing the number of clergy and opposing the government by leading 70,000 lay Catholics. On the other hand, the government had to face international pressure on the charge of violating human rights. The second option was more realistic. The three rules imposed by the government officials stated above shows that they attempted to weaken the influence of the underground church in three different aspects: the boundary of activities, the competition between the open and underground church, and the criticism of the underground clergy towards government. The rules themselves reflected that the local government had changed its attitude in dealing with the “problem” of the underground church.

The year 1994 was a milestone in regards to church–state relations in Mindong diocese. The central government issued a new ordinance named “Regulation on the Administration of Sites for Religious Activities” that year. All religious organizations had to register with the government the sites where they conducted religious activities, and the organizations themselves were to be responsible for the management of these religious sites. According to the ordinance, the registered religious sites enjoyed a legal status and the protection of the government.

The deputy director of the department of religious affairs in Fujian, Chen Cheng 陈诚, made an unusual offer to the underground priests: the underground churches were allowed to register as legal religious sites. However, the registration was to be carried out in the name of the lay-member management committee of each church, as underground priests did not have legal status. In doing so, all the underground church buildings could become legal religious sites. As for the religious activities conducted by the underground priests, the local government officials tolerated them with “one eye open, and one eye shut.” Based on this understanding, all the underground churches in Mindong were registered after 1994. Since then, the priests have celebrated mass and organized religious activities as “openly” as the “open” church. Compared to other Catholic dioceses in China, the level of religious freedom in Mindong is exceptionally high. It is noteworthy that what Chen Cheng had done was to find a grey area in the religious policy issued by the central government, so that the local government could make use of it in managing the problem of the underground church. It was the pragmatism of local government officials that made church–state relations in Mindong workable.

Why did the government official Chen Cheng help the underground church in the matter of registration? In fact, the government could leave the underground churches designated as illegal religious sites. By doing so, they could ban the church at any time with strong grounds. I asked a senior member of the underground church clergy in Mindong whether there were weaknesses in the Mindong model of church–state relations. His answer was affirmative: the weakness is that the parishes organize activities openly, from which the local government gains all the information of the underground church.<sup>16</sup> This answer shows that the underground clergy do not consider the act of government officials helping registration as showing a friendly attitude; on the contrary, it could be seen as an act of indirect control. The government officials gained information regarding the number and distribution of underground parishes in the region, as well as the people who are responsible for the parishes. In this way, the government officials could manage the church effectively, or suppress it when they needed to.

Then why did the underground clergy follow the government officials' suggestion and undertake registration? The interviewee had the following answers: they were able to choose this kind of church–state relations because they possessed certain conditions, including a team of leadership in Mindong diocese, a trusting relationship among the clergy and strong solidarity. This enabled them to negotiate with the government. Furthermore, they needed to develop the church, and hiding is not a good strategy. He used the following line to describe their strategy of interaction with the government and managing the church: “*dashi bufan, xiaoshi buduan* 大事不犯, 小事不断,” meaning that they will not do things that violate the law, and they will make unceasing efforts in developing the church. He concluded that this has been the key factor making the Mindong model of church–state relations a success.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Mindong diocese is unique compared with the other three dioceses in my research project. In Cangzhou and Wenzhou dioceses, the local governments simply suppressed the underground church and controlled the open church. In Fengxiang diocese, local government officials negotiated with the underground clergy, requesting them to join the open church. But this kind of negotiation was different from the Mindong pattern. What explanation can be found for the variation between dioceses? In my view, it depends on whether the local government considers itself able to maintain social stability. Local government officials are more willing to negotiate with underground clergy if they consider themselves unable to maintain stability. In Cangzhou and Wenzhou dioceses, the underground church was not strong and the local government could suppress them at will. In Fengxiang diocese, there was only the underground church and no open church before 2004. To better control the underground church, local government officials chose to negotiate with the underground clergy to become open church.

16 Interviewee 1, Mindong, 4 June 2007.

17 *Ibid.*

## Conclusion and Discussion

The case of Mindong diocese shows that the underground church has been resisting the control of the government over the past 30 years. I have argued that the three key factors affecting church–state relations in Mindong diocese are the competition between the open and underground churches, the mediating role of the Vatican, and the pragmatism of the local government. The underground church has surpassed the open church, gaining the legitimacy granted by the pope and the overwhelming support from the Catholic population in the diocese. The Vatican has played a mediating role in church–state relations. The underground church has held firm to the basic principles of the Catholic faith and canon law, defying the power and control of the state. It has also developed its clergy using directives from the Vatican. The local government continues to negotiate with the underground church, allowing its priests to register church buildings and organize religious activities openly. With the limited cooperation of the priests, the local government has been able to maintain social stability in the region.

The crux of the Mindong model is that the underground priests have been willing to engage in dialogue with local government officials. This has changed the attitude and behaviour of the government officials in managing the “problem” of religion, bringing to the underground church a wider space for development and a higher level of religious freedom for the broader Catholic community. I call this church–state model a “negotiated resistance,” which has the following meanings: first, the power relations of church–state interaction in Mindong diocese lie with the local government and the underground church. The role of the open church is comparatively insignificant. Second, the attitude of the local government has changed from suppression to management. But it is still a means of social control. Third, the underground church resists the control of the government and seeks organizational autonomy. The underground clergy negotiate with government officials. They stress that the church will not compromise in matters violating their faith, including the organizational integrity of the church. However, they are willing to support the government in matters that do not contravene their faith. Fourth, the local government adopts the method of management in exchange for cooperation from the underground church, which is significant in maintaining social stability in the local region.

The Mindong model merits further discussion in the study of church–state relations in contemporary China. The first issue is the pragmatism of the local government in Mindong. The local government in Mindong has adopted its own method for managing religious affairs, which is largely inconsistent with the religious policies issued by the central government. How does the central government respond to the behaviour of the local government officials, assuming that it is well informed about the deviation? I was told by an interviewee that the deputy director of the provincial religious affairs bureau, Chen Cheng, reported on Mindong’s methods of management to a higher level government body, suggesting that officials of other dioceses could learn from Mindong. If



this is true, it means the central government knew about the policy deviation, but allowed local government officials some flexibility on the matter. The case of Mindong diocese suggests that local government officials are prepared to compromise through negotiation. In the existing literature on church–state relations, some researchers have examined the behaviour of governments in regards to religious policy, laws and ordinance. The problem of this approach is that it equates written policy with behaviour, neglecting to observe that government officials are also social actors who, through their actions, determine social and political reality.

Another question involves why local government officials have been willing to negotiate with underground church leaders and make concessions? The answer lies in the fact that Mindong has a very large number of Catholics in the population. The underground church has approximately 70,000 members, the majority of the Catholic population in Mindong. In the interests of social stability, local officials are prepared to negotiate with the underground church. Failure to do so could result in social upheaval in the region the local officials are responsible for. This political reality drives officials to adopt a more pragmatic attitude towards religious matters, even if they contradict the religious policies issued by the central government. At the same time, the priests of the open church appear to be largely neglected by local government officials because the number of Catholics in the open church is almost insignificant.

The Mindong model also provides an interesting case for researchers to reflect on the issue of religious freedom in mainland China. My research findings show that the resistance of the Catholic clergy is a key factor behind the expansion of religious freedom. However, this kind of religious freedom is fragile and limited because it is due to government officials' selective exercise of power and tolerance, rather than the rights stipulated by the law. One can imagine that if the conditions change, for example if the central government demands that religious policy be strictly implemented, or if new personnel are appointed in the local government who do not tolerate deviation, then the religious freedoms enjoyed presently may rapidly contract. In the long run, the priests should strive for human rights and the rule of law, which provide a solid foundation for religious freedom. However, the legal system in China lacks independence because it always serves the will of government officials. The prospect of religious freedom is also dependent on a mature environment in which the rule of law over arbitrary decisions is a value and norm in society.

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