The Priests and The People
Relationships and Identity in The Hanyang Mission 1921-1938

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Contents

Abstract

‘The spires of many cathedrals rise over China. Their pews are filled with worshippers who together raise their voices to God, beseeching him to lay blessings upon Ireland, the nation who delivered them from Paganism.’[1] This is a dream of a future unfulfilled, given in a lecture to prospective Irish Catholic missionaries. This dissertation explores how the Columban missionaries sought to bring this dream to life in the diocese of Hanyang over a twenty-year period. It is about the complex relationships which formed between Chinese people and these primarily Irish missionaries, the relationship of a missionary to their flock, to converts and, to the un-converted. Some were hostile, like confrontations with the burgeoning Communist movement; others largely friendly but nonetheless fraught with ambiguity, like those with new converts and old Catholic communities. As such this dissertation is a step toward connecting the history of the Columban mission with trends in the study of Chinese Christianity which stress the experience of Chinese Christians. Missionary work was a practice where the spiritual and the material could not be untwined. Everything the Columbans did or tried to do was inflected by this context, by their Irishness, by Western Imperialism

[1] This is a liberal paraphrase for effect.

in China, by warfare and the floods which decimated their diocese. The daily practice of mission work revealed the gaps between dreams and reality. This dissertation is the story of how missionaries tried to bridge these gaps and how Chinese people, Catholic or otherwise, made use of, rejected or related to this missionary endeavour.

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Introduction

'The spires of many cathedrals rise over China. Their pews are filled with worshippers who together raise their voices to God, beseeching him to lay blessings upon Ireland, the nation who delivered them from Paganism.'[2] This is a vision of a future unfulfilled, invoked in a lecture given, in all likelihood, to prospective Irish Catholic missionaries in the 1910s. Over the following three decades, Columban missionaries, so called for the medieval Irish missionary Saint Columbanus, would live and work in China. They, like so many other groups, foreign and domestic, sought to shape China's oncoming modernity. China was undergoing an intellectually alive and violent period of metamorphosis. The final shape of the nation or even the existence of the nation was not assured. The Irish too were reaching a tumultuous peak in their national question. The formative years of the mission ran parallel with the Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War. For the Columbans as for so many foreign adventurers before them, China was a place made alluring by its size and distance. At once an imperial, religious, cultural, and mercantile frontier, it was the great unconverted land, a prize for the latest wave of Christian missionary movements of all de-

[2] "CN1/147 Galvin Letters and Papers Regarding China" ([1912?]-25 June 1923), This is a liberal paraphrase for effect.

nominations who had followed the imperialists into China in the latter half of the 19th Century. But among the Columbans self-conceptions and pre-conceptions would be tested, tempered, and in some cases broken by the grind of mission work. It was one thing to dream and another thing entirely to bring that dream to bear upon a people.

This dissertation explores the Columban mission in what was to become the Hanyang diocese from their first excursions in 1921 to the Japanese invasion in 1938. The most comprehensive academic treatment of the Columbans to date is Neil Collin's *The Splendid Cause* and his chapter on the mission in Hanyang underlies many of my assumptions. The Columbans, like many Catholic orders in 20th century Ireland, have not received sufficient academic attention, this dissertation is intended to be a small step in that direction. What I seek to understand is the character of the mission's relationship to the Chinese people, specifically the role of Chinese people within the practice of the mission by studying the letters, administrative documents and magazines produced by Columban missionaries. Manuscript sources are cited by their archival listing number. Some of the sources cited are from two transcribed collections compiled by Fr. Edward Kelly in Hong Kong and these are cited by page number. Although some of this material has been edited, this appears to have been done for length and relevance, rather than to bowdlerise. One can never be totally sure what has been left out and for what reasons but given that this was the only way to access these sources, I have decided to include them. All other materials cited are original copies stored in the Columban Central archives in Dalgan Park.

Chinese Catholics did not feature in the higher levels of the mission's organisation and thus documents where they speak for themselves are few and far between. They are seen in these sources only through the eyes of the missionary, playing, as it were, stock characters in the well-trod narratives of evangelisation. This dissertation is, among other things, an attempt to read against the grain of these sources and reconsider the role of Chinese people within this particular mission. To keep things focused I have only considered the practice of the mission outside the city of Hanyang. This approach has the unintended effect that most of the mission personnel who feature are priests, this was not representative of the mission in Hanyang as a whole. Columban and Loretto Sisters made vital contributions as did Christian Brothers, but all did so largely within the city of Hanyang and as such they are given little consideration here. The picture of the mission priest sketched is a composite figure, pulled together from the beliefs and practices of many men who were not in total agreement on every point. For this reason and to avoid bogging the reader down, I opt for generic terms when the name of an individual is not necessary. Some terminology has been simplified or altered for ease of reading. When I write Catholics I mean Chinese Catholics, and when I write missionaries I mean Columban priests unless otherwise stated. The term Columban mission is used instead of the Maynooth Mission to China, the organisation's public title from its founding to 1925.[3]

Chapter 1 is stage setting to give the reader essential context. It consists of two sections: the first an account of the founding of the Columbans, the second a sketch of central China in the early 1920s when the Columbans arrived. Both

[3]Neil Collins, *The Splendid Cause : The Missionary Society of St. Columban, 1916-1954* (n.p.: Blackrock, Co. Dublin : Columba Press, 2009), 65.

are largely syntheses of secondary sources. Chapter 2 is based on primary source material and is divided into two loosely chronological sections, each covering a theme in the relationship of Columban missionaries to Chinese people. The first is an account of how the routine practice of mission conditioned interactions and relationships and deals mostly with the early years of the mission 1920-1926 . The second examines how violence altered the practice of mission between 1926-1931. Chapter 3 examines the theme of transactions, spiritual and temporal, in mission work and also explores how the Columbans approached a large increase in conversions after 1931. This dissertation is not a true chronology of the Columban mission in the Hanyang territory, and no section stays completely within these rough boundaries. The informed reader will further notice that some significant events in the history of the mission are given short shrift. Those looking for a general history of the Hanyang diocese should look to chapter 3 of Neil Collin's *The Splendid Cause*.[4] What this dissertation seeks to elucidate is the complexity of relationships that mission work in republican China created, to highlight how two groups, Columban missionaries and the people of who lived near Hanyang, navigated a tumultuous period.

[4]Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 86.

Chapter 1

Beginnings

1.1 Ireland

To understand the character of the mission's relationship to the Chinese it is first necessary to explain how the Columbans began and how their outlook and methods were shaped by these beginnings. In the 19th Century, Irish priests had fanned across the globe but they largely did so in the wake of the British empire and following the diaspora.[1] Outside of these excursions, Irish Catholic clergy were largely ambivalent toward mission.[2] The expansive evangelical missions of the French had no modern antecedent in Irish Catholicism. Sentiment toward mission among the Irish clergy shifted, however, as two French mis-

[1] Hilary M. Carey, "Overseas Missions," ed. Carmen Margaret Mangion and Susan O'Brien, in *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism*, ed. James Edward Kelly and John McCafferty, vol. IV (Oxford New York (N.Y.): Oxford university press, 2023), 284.

[2] Edmund M. Hogan, "The Motivation of the Modern Irish Missionary Movement 1912-1939," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 10, no. 3 (1979): 159.

sionary societies, *the Congregation du Saint Esprit (C.S.Sp.)* and the *Missions Africaines de Lyons (S.M.A*) established an educational presence in Ireland in the latter half of the century.[3] Their presence helped to familiarise Irish Catholics with the figure of the missionary through their public appeals for support which focused on the few Irishmen working in their societies.[4]

This shift in perception combined with demographic pressures to create welcome circumstances for an Irish missionary movement. By the turn of the century, overseas Irish Catholic communities were training enough clergy to meet their own needs, meaning that Ireland, itself in the midst of an growth in vocations, was training a surplus of priests.[5] An atmosphere of heightened nationalism gave shape to these pressures in the form of a patriotic mission rhetoric. National and religious pride, conceived of as one and the same, found an outlet for expression in mission work, and recruitment material invoked the mythos of Irish churchmen working in Europe during the middle ages.

Rome too was turning toward new approaches to mission in China. Since the 1840s Catholic mission in China had taken on an imperialist face. The predominantly French missionaries, did not tend to follow the practices established by the Jesuit missions of the 16th century which emphasised linguistic and cultural knowledge and adaptation to Chinese norms.[6] Mission now came with an assumption of the superiority of European culture and practice. The French government's declaration that they were protectors of Catholic missionaries in

[3]Hogan, "The Motivation of the Modern Irish Missionary Movement 1912-1939," 161.
[4]Hogan, "The Motivation of the Modern Irish Missionary Movement 1912-1939," 159.
[5]Hogan, "The Motivation of the Modern Irish Missionary Movement 1912-1939," 161.
[6]D. E. Mungello, *The Catholic Invasion of China: Remaking Chinese Christianity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 39.

China was an unwelcome undermining of the Vatican's authority in China.[7] An Irish missionary organisation working in China would help erode French dominance and be able to provide English language instruction in schools, an attractive prospect as it would allow the Catholics to compete with Anglo-American missions who used English language teaching to bring Chinese elites into Christian schools. In Ireland and abroad the timing was right for a Chinese mission.

As a student in Maynooth, Edward Galvin had his interest in China sparked after he heard a Canadian missionary, John M. Fraser give a lecture. This and a chance meeting with Fraser in Brooklyn, culminated in Galvin setting off for China in 1912 where he worked in the east of Zhejiang province until 1916. Galvin's mission work was, due to lack of priests, largely confined to tending to the disparate communities of Chinese Catholics. The experience left Galvin with a conviction that the difficulties of mission could be overcome with sufficient numbers of priests and nuns, and a wealth of stories to send back to Ireland to impress the need for missionary recruits. By 1915 Galvin and two other Irish missionaries had begun to work at establishing a Chinese mission college in Ireland. The proposal was put to the Irish hierarchy and started to pick up steam, despite fears that French missionaries might move to block it.[8] After building support in Ireland, the question was brought to Rome. The overtly Irish character of the proposed mission created confused rumours in the halls of Propaganda Fide that it was a Sinn Fein plot to avoid enlistment but plans nonetheless went ahead.[9]

[7] Mungello, *The Catholic Invasion of China*, 42.
[8] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 45.
[9] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 54.

By 1918, the mission had opened a college in Dalgan Park, Galway, where an institutional culture drawing from Irish nationalism flourished. Students and teachers lived in common and conceived of themselves in terms of Irish national heroes and legendary figures.[10] Mission literature in this period, produced by the Columbans and other organisations, used military metaphors to make mission appealing to would-be recruits and supporters. Mission was made akin to military adventure. The relationship between missionary and non-Christian was that between conqueror and conquered, non-Catholic Christians were an adversary to be defeated. As Frank Hogan has noted, this literature drew from popular novels about military matters aimed at men and channelled latent desires for military-esque adventure through spiritual conquests.[11]

1.2 China

In 1920, the budding mission was assigned Hanyang, a city in the central province of Hubei which sits on the confluence of the Yangtze and the Han rivers, and its environs. To Hanyang's west, lay the bulk of the mission territory, an area about the size of Ulster, a plain crossed with rivers and dotted with lakes, supporting a population of 5 million, a scant 15,000 of whom were Catholics, many from communities centuries old. Hubei sits in the middle of China, a province defined by its relationship to water. Broad, navigable and flowing through highly populated areas, the Yangtze had connected Hubei to large trading networks since settlement began in the region. Hubei was an ideal foothold in central China

[10] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 54.
[11] Hogan, "The Motivation of the Modern Irish Missionary Movement 1912-1939," 162.

for foreign incursion, centrally placed, well connected and easy to reach from Shanghai, one of the foreign powers' most secure bases in China.

Central to this foreign incursion was Wuhan, or rather, Hankou, one of the three cities which made up the tri-city area of Wuhan. Hankou lay on the southern shore of the Yangtze looking out onto its confluence with the Han river and had long been a mercantile hub. Foreign concession areas were established here in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Increased missionary work followed the introduction of foreign commercial and military power. British and American missions operated in and around Wuhan, preaching and establishing schools and hospitals. By the time the Columbans arrived the people of Hubei had already seen missions expand and contract over the landscape. Previous Catholic missions had left communities of believers spread across the territory. Hubei had its own Catholic martyr, John Gabriel Perboyre *Congregation of the Mission* (1802-1840) who had been executed by the Qing government. The Catholic communities of Hubei, some centuries old, had a strong sense of their own history. And over 80 years after his death, they would show Perboyre's relics to the newly arrived Columbans.[12]

Wuhan was never to be defined by its foreign residents as Shanghai was. Rather its character was that of a revolutionary capital. It had been the site of the 1911 Wuchang uprising, the spark which ended dynastic rule in China. When the northern expedition, the military campaign of the Guomindang to unite the country under their rule, swept through the city in 1926, it briefly became home to a left wing government who claimed it as their capital. When a little more than

[12]Edward Kelly, "CN1/122 Historical Report" (c. 1990s), 13.

a decade later the Japanese were bearing down on central China, Wuhan again became capital this time under Chiang Kai-Shek's military government. At three points in three decades, Wuhan had been central in China's national struggle. These were not incidental facts for the Columbans. Wuhan's position within Chinese political life made it a dynamic and unpredictable location. Anti-foreign and Anti-Christian activism was strong here, as was the Communist movement.

The Columbans were however a step removed from the most intense of the city's political and revolutionary life. They had, against their wishes so as to not step on toes of the Franciscans who worked in Hubei, been assigned Hanyang and its outlying regions.[13] Hanyang was by all accounts, the sleepiest of the three cities which made up Wuhan. When anti-foreign sentiment ran high in the late 1920s, it was comparatively sheltered.[14] As Galvin wrote at the height of the anti-foreign movement "Hanyang though in the hub of things has been quiet right through".[15] Hanyang was not without industry. It was home to an iron and steel works and an arsenal. But it remained a quieter place than most. Here the missionaries would come for safety when they were pushed out of their missions which was by no means an infrequent occurrence.

Politically, socially and militarily, the period during which the Columbans were active in Hubei was tumultuous. Political power in republican China was split between various factions of warlords and China was in a state of low-boiling internecine war. Hubei was an especially intense area of what has been termed by Hans Van de Ven, a "culture of violence" which permeated Chinese society

[13] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 80.
[14] Edward Kelly, "CN1/121 Historical Report" (1991), 53.
[15] *CN1/147*, 99.

in this period.[16] Casual brutality from soldiers, bandits and revolutionaries was a fact of life. As the Warlord era waned in the late 1920s, the early stages of the Chinese civil war replaced it when, after the purge of the Chinese Communist Party from the government, the nationalists embarked on a violent campaign of containment and suppression to root the Communists out of the countryside. This period of instability for Hubei was punctuated by a colossal flood in 1931 which put swathes of land underwater, leaving tens of millions destitute and killing approximately 2 million people.[17] The 1930s in Hubei ended with the siege and fall of Wuhan to the Japanese.

For the foreigner enclosed in one of Hankou's concessions, this procession of violent and uncontrollable events was only the tragic circumstances of a land in which they nominally resided, but from whose conditions they were sheltered. Mission work could not give the Columbans the same measure of protection. Missionaries, for the most part, lived, struggled and died out in the towns and villages among the people. It was here they would define their relationship to the people.

[16] Hans J. Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925-1945* (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 94.

[17] Chris Courtney, *The Nature of Disaster in China: The 1931 Yangzi River Flood*, Studies in Environment and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 5.

Chapter 2

Practice & Violence

2.1 Practice

The years 1921-26 were characterised by a steady expansion of church infrastructure, although conversion was underwhelming. Ideally, priests were assigned in groups of two to a parish. The parish itself comprised of a town which the priests would call home and outlying mission stations which were visited periodically. Property was bought or rented for multi-purpose use as schools, chapels and homes for priests. From these centres priests travelled, providing basic spiritual services to outlying villages and establishing schools and chapels. Mass was not a weekly affair outside of the city and depended entirely on the capacity of a priest to travel.

On entering a community for the first time, be it village or town, the priest would generally receive a welcome from the locals, Catholics and non-Catholics

alike. These were lively welcomes, often with fireworks but, as one priest warned in his account of starting new missions, one should not be "inclined to attach too much importance to such external manifestations of enthusiasm."[1] Drawing interest and building solid foundations for conversion took time. That said, welcomes were more than a politeness, they were a chance for Catholics to impress upon the missionary their needs. In many cases, the missionary was not entering blind but had previously received signs of interest from villagers and taken the names of likely catechists.[2] For these communities of old Catholics, the arrival of new priests meant that the provision of sacraments would increase, mass would be heard with greater frequency and confessions could once more be made.[3] They nonetheless had long-standing practices of worship which were not to be altered by newcomers. When a missionary observed that the funerary practices of the old Catholics were not standard, the local Chinese priest said he had tried many times to get them to change but had yet to succeed.[4]

Catholic communities were not passive recipients of missionary work. On occasions when they felt missionaries had not lived up to their standards, they complained. An apostolic delegate who visited the mission in 1921, received a complaint from Catholics, detailing a series of infractions allegedly committed by Columbans, ranging from indecently swimming nude, drunkenness, violence and insufficient provision of sacraments.[5] Some of these, Galvin claimed, had occurred when the territory was under Franciscan jurisdiction indicating that for

[1] "The Far East Magazine", January, 1924, 5.
[2] ibid.
[3] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 13.
[4] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 33.
[5] "CN1/73 Administration of Hanyang Mission" (October 18, 1921–, July 29, 1924).

these Catholics the coming of a new mission had not changed their experience of the church significantly enough to differentiate the two orders. The complaint was later retracted after negotiation with the local Catholics. The apostolic delegate did not seem to be particularly moved by the accusations. Galvin in a letter to Ireland wrote that the delegate felt there was "no room for doubt that the accusations were absolutely false" and further intimated that they showed "the very difficulties which [the Columbans] have had to encounter since [they] arrived".[6] Despite the retraction, it is significant that local communities made use of the supra-national machinery of the church. They worried about the state of their souls and were willing to hold missionaries to account when they did not meet their standards. However, the capacity of Catholics to make such official criticisms appears to have been low. While Columbans had not become their sole connection to the church as there were Chinese priests working in the territory, they nonetheless comprised a majority of clergy. Most complaints were dealt with on an informal level, within the Columbans themselves and between priests and laity.

Progress toward conversion moved in fits and spurts as missionaries had to work around the rhythms of people's lives. While schools and chapels became a regular parts of the lives of those who used them, actual conversion was a more involved process. Priests may have been interesting and exotic figures in the communities they visited but they could not demand too much of those curious about the church. In rural areas, harvesting season held little opportunity for spiritual work as the whole community took to the fields from dawn till dusk.[7]

[6] *CN1/73*.
[7] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 28.

In fact, all work toward conversion had to be packed in a short window of four months between November and April, with another month taken off for Chinese New Year.[8]

It was not only the Catholics who responded positively to the arrival of missionaries. Prominent citizens of towns and villages, politicians and military men all frequently received the missionaries with politeness. When in 1922, the assignment of a priest was changed, the town held a banquet to send off the outgoing pastor and to welcome the new. The farewell was complete with a honorary military formation outside the local church for the priest's inspection.[9] Chinese people working on mission business benefited too. On one occasion, a priest's assistant, caught short of the boatman's fare, used his missionary connection to travel on credit.[10] Internally, missionaries fretted over tight finances, but externally they were viewed as a thoroughly liquid organisation. It was a view which they tried to downplay amongst their flock but nonetheless pervaded and was certainly reinforced by their school and chapel building efforts.

After entering the settlement, receiving a welcome and making oneself known, the next task of the missionary was to hire a catechist and start a school, for children a day school, and for adults a night school they could attend after they had finished their day's labour. These first meetings of missionary and local were often mediated through established Catholics in the community. Catholic families provided food, shelter and credibility to the missionary. They could explain his purpose and spread the word that he might bring a school. Missionaries would

[8]"CN1/167 The Harvest in Chang Tang Kow" ([c. late 1930s]).
[9]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 17.
[10]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 61.

appoint local Catholics as teachers and catechists to instruct children and others who might be interested. A house would be rented, bought or provided by a believer for a school which would set aside some time each day to teach catechism alongside a curriculum with general appeal. Schools and chapels once established then had to be visited regularly to provide sacraments, and to supervise instruction.

Accounts of teaching show the attentiveness of students to slights and inequalities. One adult student, in response to a priest's lecture on the equality of all races and nations, replied that he had evidence that even in heaven Chinese are not treated equally. He showed the priest an image of the virgin Mary surrounded by saints marked by halos and in the corner were two Chinese Catholics without halos. This, he said, was inequality in heaven.[11] This anecdote was written to show a student's humorous misunderstanding of Catholic symbolism and ends with the priest correcting him and explaining the significance of saints. It reveals more that its author intended. The student's criticism shows that even those accepting enough of Christianity to learn doctrine understood that within faith they would contend with racial hierarchy. Mission then, even among Catholics or potential Catholics, was not conceived to be separate from the hierarchies of race and nation. National and ethnic pride had to be defended within the realm of belief as within the realm of politics.

Alongside schools and chapels, the mission also provided medical services through dispensaries and travelling doctors. Like schools, dispensaries served all-comers, and were seen as a route to conversion, although these were a later

[11] "CN1/156 John O'Leary Reports and Letters" (August 4, 1926–1927).

addition to the mission. As with education, Columbans intended to compete with Protestant missions through provision of medical services. Between 1921 and 1923 three doctors, all foreign, and their four Chinese assistants provided medical help to over 17,000 people across 28 stations.[12] The wandering doctors did not last long and were gradually dismissed from the mission due to financial constraints, the last leaving in 1925.[13] Still missionaries from time to time provided medical assistance themselves. Father Quinlan working in Yo-Ba, a town in central Hubei, recounted in a letter how he was asked by local Catholics to visit the sick and give his advice. When he successfully quieted the fears of an old man and a mother worrying about her infant, he commented that he had come to be seen as a "wonder worker" in the area.[14] The basic skills he had shown, reading a pulse and using a thermometer, would not have been so unknown to people that their execution would bring rapturous praise.[15] But nonetheless it shows that although no missionary could perform miracles, medical work was thought of as filling a similar role.

Connected to the mission's medical goals was its attitude toward women. Women, in theory, were central to the mission's goals as they were the key to the family. Converting a woman, it was assumed, would be a first step toward securing the Catholic family. Through schools, Columbans could teach children the fundamentals of Catholicism but if the parents could not be reached then this opening might be squandered. To reach women, the Columbans planned

[12]"CN1/100 Report to the Apostolic Delegate in China" (March 5–, May 8, 1923).
[13]Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 102.
[14]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 33.
[15]Bridie Andrews, *The Making of Modern Chinese Medicine, 1850-1960* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 54.

to use women religious who could teach and provide medical help to Chinese women without crossing the boundaries of propriety. First the Loretto sisters from America were brought to Hanyang in 1922 to teach female students and to train lay Chinese consecrated virgins.[16] By the 1930s this work had expanded to training Chinese women to become nuns. The Columban sisters, established in 1924 to support the Columbans, came to Hanyang in 1926.[17] Many were trained as nurses which meant they could provide medical services to Chinese women who for reasons of propriety preferred not to be attended by male doctors. While the mission's original goal had been to have women religious working across the territory, this never came to pass. The danger of assigning them to mission stations outside the city was deemed too great given the unpredictable political situation. When in 1930 an attempt to bring some Columban sisters to a nearby town was interrupted by a communist assault which ended in two priests being taken prisoner, the question of nuns working outside the city seems to have been put to rest.[18]

The division of mission labour was quite clear cut, nuns worked in and around the confines of Hanyang from where they could quickly retreat to Shanghai if danger arose, while priests worked the missions outside the city. In effect this meant that despite intentions for a clear and proper division of sexes, priests were nonetheless compelled to work with women more closely than many felt was comfortable. One missionary complained of having to sleep in the same room as married couples and their female children, dignity only protected by a

[16]Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 111.
[17]Edward Fischer, *Maybe a Second Spring : The Story of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban in China* (n.p.: New York : Crossroad, 1983), 29.
[18]Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 118.

hanging sheet separating them.[19] Another commented to his superior that he felt he had no problems in China except that he found it a difficult place for temptations of the flesh, perhaps another reflection of this lack of division.[20]

Women, nonetheless, were necessary for mission work. Galvin in a 1925 report wrote that "quite a few" of the missions catechists were women who would travel from town to town to "prepare women and girls for confession and communion".[21] Perhaps the mission also appreciated that part-time female teachers could be paid half that of their male counterparts.[22] It is difficult to gauge the extent of women's involvement over the long term but it is likely, given that work outside of the city was generally deemed too dangerous for missionary women, that a large portion of the mission work intended for Chinese women was undertaken by Chinese women.

Part of the process of conversion was the renunciation of non-Christian religious objects. When a family became catechumens they customarily relinquished these items to their priest, a practice which represented a commitment to the new faith but also salted the earth making it harder to return to old practices in the absence of a priest. One missionary had in 1923 amassed of a collection of over religious 15 items which he shipped to Ireland.[23] Another reported that he had wanted to send the "pagan tablets" home but did not want to deprive the new converts of the pleasure of smashing them and throwing them onto a bonfire.[24] Missionaries were keenly aware of the social repercussions

[19] "CN1/37 Correspondence Re Finance" (February 23–, December 22, 1922).
[20] "CN1/102 Director's Visitation Report 1927" (April 20–, May 2, 1927).
[21] "CN1/40 Correspondence Re Finance" (January 14–, December 16, 1925).
[22] *CN1/167*.
[23] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 23.
[24] *The Far East Magazine*, November, 1924, 195.

of conversion. In night schools they taught their catechumens set phrases and dialogues to answer common questions and jibes given to the new convert by their peers; “to think that you in your old age should desert the religion of your ancestors” the convert might be asked. They were instructed to explain that “the ancient Chinese adored only one God and that idolatry was of more recent origin”.[25] The truth of these statements is less important than their implication. Converts created small ruptures in the social fabric of their locality, points of tension that were seen as productive by missionaries as it was assumed that Christians could themselves create a pressure on their non-Christian peers in the absence of a priest.

2.2 Violence

The work of the Columbans was disrupted in the late 1920s by a succession of political and military upheavals. First, anti-foreign and anti-Christian activity was ignited in 1925 after a massacre of civilians by the British in Shanghai. Then the Northern Expedition swept through Hubei, heightening nationalist sentiments and making Wuhan the capital of a short lived left-wing government and bringing fiercely patriotic soldiers into the territory. In 1927, an outrage in Hankou’s British concession and the purging of the Communists from the government brought a new height of violence to Hanyang and its environs which had now become an active area of civil war.

In this tumultuous period, missionaries found their relationship with the gen-

[25] *CN1/156*.

eral populace rapidly decaying. The people's acceptance of missionaries was unreliable from the start. Columbans were to most, although they often resented the position, the representatives of the much hated foreign presence in China. The prominence of being foreign was a two sided coin. Acceptance and persecution came from the same root, the perception that they belonged to a wealthy and important foreign institution. The first experience most had with the mission was through the lens of what it could provide materially. The same interest, however, took a turn when nationalism surged. Missionaries who, in the early years of mission, had marched into villages, streets lined with onlookers, well-wishers and Catholics, now found themselves being marched back out bound in rope.[26] The public found these foreigners interesting, perhaps useful, but the character of this relationship was largely unrelated to the actions of the missionaries themselves, but instead was governed by the turns of Chinese politics. In this regard, they were an insignificance, in that however much attention was focused on them, they rarely needed to be considered on their own terms. Likewise the missionaries tended toward seeing the unconverted as raw material in the spiritual race against Protestant missions.[27] Both parties, however close they might have rubbed shoulders, tended to see the other as a means to an end.

Anti-foreign and anti-Christian political sentiments coalesced into violence against missionaries who were by virtue of their work among the few foreigners to labour outside the safer confines of the city. They were, in other words, ideal lightning rods for social discontent, outnumbered, unarmed and prominent. Nationalist soldiers would billet in churches or harass and kill mission person-

[26] "CN1/151 Reports on Hanyang" (1927).
[27] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 74.

nel. Communists and Bandits alike kidnapped missionaries for ransom. Militant unions threatened, captured and ran missionaries out of their towns. Missionaries were not, however, in most cases the victims of uncontrolled mob violence. Their person was charged with political meaning and generally speaking killing missionaries was not the aim of those who assaulted them. Unions, for example, seemed to be largely interested in removing them via threats, but were loath to raise the attention of their government by crossing the line to murder. Violence and threats toward missionaries were organised attempts to use their political and symbolic value. They were often protected by a halo of foreignness. They were emblems of foreign incursion into China, this made them targets but also sheltered them from the worst excesses of a violent period, a reality which was acknowledged in the reminisces of Fr. Patsy O'Connell who wrote that while it was well known that missionaries "had a hard time abroad", this gave "no idea whatever of the terrible ordeal the Chinese people themselves are going through."[28]

One event in particular shows this disparity in stark terms. On the 8th of June 1927, Fr. William O'Flynn was travelling by boat with a catechist Michael Wong to a nearby town.[29] They had heard soldiers were on the move and were hassling travellers, stopping them and commandeering their boats. O'Leary, at the suggestion of local Catholics, had a note drafted by a government official promising them safe passage. The party, as warned, were stopped by soldiers along the way and sent to meet a Colonel who quickly dismissed O'Leary. Wong, however, was upbraided as a running dog, a choice insult for a Chinese

[28]"CN1/173 'Two Troubled Years: A Few Sidelights'" ([c.1931-1932]).
[29]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 11.

person working for foreigners, and called a spy. The commotion grew and the Colonel ordered his execution, while O'Leary's release was quickly negotiated by a group of local Catholics who vouched that the priest was trustworthy. Targets as they were, there were limits to the violence done to missionaries. A missionary being killed in China was an international incident which threatened backlash, the killing of a Chinese man did not attract the same attention. This put Chinese Catholics in a precarious position, they associated with the mission without the protection its foreignness afforded.

Priests were aware of how Christianity and foreignness were closely associated and tried to subvert it as it was a hindrance to missionary work. Galvin remarked in a letter that the use by previous missions of indemnities explained to some extent "why we have made such slow progress" among the educated Chinese.[30] These indemnities were coercively extracted from the Chinese government by foreign powers to pay for damages to anything they considered their own or under their protection, this included many mission properties. Among politically minded Chinese people, these were understandably a deeply unpopular concession. A mission making use of these opened itself up to criticism. Missionaries tended to take the position that their work was hindered by the ongoing tumult and that a strong stable Chinese nation was only to their benefit, the unspoken assumption was of course that this unrealised national would welcome foreign missions. Whatever belief Galvin had in the national project, it did not stop him from pushing for the mission to make a claims for indemnities on multiple occasions.[31] In 1925 he suggested that a representative appear before the

[30] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 82.

[31] "CN1/74 Administration of Hanyang Mission" (August 18, 1924–, May 22, 1925).

commission of the Boxer indemnity fund, so named as it was the concession extracted from the Qing government after the suppression of the anti-foreign boxer rebellion by a joint army of imperialist powers. This he did so, only on the condition that it could be achieved without rousing the public in China.[32] All of which would suggest that any courting of public opinion as regards Chinese nationalism was a superficial effort rather than a matter of conviction.

This can be further supported by the responses of missionaries to direct threats. On one occasion, when a union formed in their Hanyang embroidery, priests in the city of Hanyang appealed directly to Eugene Chen, a minister in the Wuhan government who was a Catholic, to deal with the issue.[33] This coercive approach was not available to the mission priest. Anti-foreign agitation was "felt more keenly in country districts" where appeals to authority held less sway.[34] Unions were not an adversary which could be faced directly when there was no local force willing to intervene on the missionaries behalf. So missionaries were, when the opportunity presented itself, conciliatory toward these adversaries, seeking to convince them that they were different from the merchants and imperialists who filled the ranks of foreigners in China. They argued that they, unlike others, were here not to take but to give without prejudice and to support the Chinese people and the Chinese nation.

Dialogue was a last resort and was not an option with the Red Army or bandits who used missionaries to access their resources, through robbery or ransom. However, with the milieu of other nationalist and left-wing groups who

[32]"CN1/41 Correspondence Re Finance" (January 21–, December 23, 1926).
[33]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 64.
[34]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 64.

threatened missionaries they would at least have a chance to speak. Although, if they had been adequately forewarned, missionaries might abscond to a safer location. Such efforts at conciliation produced mixed results. On some occasions they were spared from harm on others their words had no effect. When in 1927 a church was assaulted by the local peasants union, its priest met the group on the doorstep hoping to persuade them to turn away. The union, which had previously warned him to close his school, paid the argument no mind. Their response was simple: "The priests would be spared if they promised to leave China and never again teach religion there".[35]

Despite threats, missionaries were loath to retreat to Shanghai as many of Hubei's foreigners did in times of crisis. Missionaries continuing work during times of trouble was not a matter of policy but conviction supported by the mission hierarchy. A 1927 letter stated that "when it is a question of a priest giving his life [...] I do not believe it is the proper thing [...] to order him to stay with his people. If a man is called upon to face death, I'd wish above all things that he himself would freely and willingly offer his life to the God who gave it to him".[36] Staying and exposing themselves to danger was taken to be an expression of higher calling, to the mission, to God and to the Chinese.[37]

Columbans were alive to the parallels which could be drawn between the Irish and Chinese experiences of imperialism. One speech written by a Columban gave a potted history of modern China through an Irish lens. It was harshly anti-Machu, the nomadic group which had conquered China in the 16th century and

[35]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 44.

[36]"CN1/159 Disturbances in Hupeh and Conditions in Hanyang" (January 23, 1927–, December 30, 1929).

[37]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 61.

established the Qing dynasty, declaring that they were an “alien race” which had enforced upon the Han Chinese “extreme conservatism”.[38] The state of China was compared to that of Ireland in the immediate post-famine period, poor, ignorant and backward.[39] In practice, however, missionaries did not tend to stress the national character of the mission.[40] It was not usually necessary for the missionaries to be seen as anything more then representatives of the Catholic Church. The need to communicate Irish identity only came at moments of crisis when distancing oneself from the coterie of foreign powers operating in the area, most importantly from the English, was necessary. As anti-foreign activity grew, so did the need to stress their Irish dimension, only because “if anybody should raise an English cry against us we were done”.[41]

There do seem to have been times when this worked. Galvin in a 1927 letter recounted that while travelling he and his companions had been “surrounded by a yelling mob”. The crowd’s anger dissipated, however, as soon as the travellers said they were Irish. Instead, he reports, they began to clap, saying “the Irish and Chinese are brothers” and that no one should bother these missionaries.[42] The story is not as implausible as it might initially seem. Galvin had little reason to overstate the efficacy of using Irish identity as protection in a private letter. Other missionaries had reported similar happenings where by being Irish they gained some leniency from an otherwise hostile group. The Anglo-Irish war began the same year as the May 4th movement in China, a defining period

[38] *CN1/147*.
[39] *CN1/147*.
[40] *CN1/156*.
[41] *CN1/156*.
[42] *CN1/159*.

of anti-Imperial intellectual development, and it appears that this coincidence left some lingering understanding that the Irish were apart from the European imperial powers.

However, the effect of this should not be overstated. In 1927, two priests were captured from their church in Yuin-lung-ho by union members because of a rumour that there were English men and a stash of guns inside the building. After being taken prisoner, they explained they were Irishmen and, moreover, as Irishmen they too had been oppressed by English hands. Whether they were satisfied with this explanation or simply did not want to deal with these captives, a union tribunal agreed that they should be released on condition that the priests took no action against them.[43] The next morning they set off escorted by pikemen. Whenever the procession passed through a village, the priests would be loosely bound with rope to make it seem as though they were still prisoners, then a banner would be hoisted bearing anti-Imperial and anti-Christian slogans and one of the escort's number would strike up a chant inviting the locals to "come and see the English devils" despite protests and corrections from the two priests. On this occasion, it did not serve their captors interests that the priests were Irish. It was far more convenient that they be English as the British concession in Hankou had, a few months ago, been stormed by a Chinese crowd after British soldiers had shot and killed Chinese civilians in Shanghai. Having an "English devil" to parade was a resonant political message, while an Irish devil would have meant little.

Their captors were not entirely incorrect in associating the Columbans with

[43] *CN1/151*.

British power in China. The British consul had in 1921 told the Columbans that whether they wanted it or not "the British government claimed the right of protecting [them] both in person and property" and furthermore asserted the consulate's right to extract indemnities from the Chinese government on the Columbans' behalf.[44] This was a precautionary measure, as it was felt that if Columbans were attacked and the British did not retaliate then "the Chinese mob would think that they could destroy the property of missionaries under British protection with impunity."[45] This protection was perhaps an one of the reasons why in 1930 when priests were kidnapped by Communists, a Royal Navy ship was enlisted in the ransom operation. However unwelcome their involvement was initially, the mission's relation to the consulate appears to have been genial. When the consul general left Hankou in 1932, he was called a friend of the mission and they tried to arrange for him to visit Navan for a fishing trip.[46]

Missionaries were nominally protected by the government but in reality this could not shelter them from violence. In an atmosphere of pervasive threat, the Catholic laity formed a vital protective network across the diocese. Missionaries pushed out of a town by anti-foreign activity often found refuge in remote localities with strong Catholic communities and laid low till the trouble died down.[47] A journeying priest might be tipped off to brigands or Communist operating further up the road by a local Catholic.[48] When a union was planning to storm a

[44] "CN1/65 Hanyang Property" (November 23, 1920–, May 16, 1931).
[45] *CN1/65*.
[46] "CN1/77 Administration of Chinese Missions" (February 13, 1931–, December 23, 1932).
[47] "CN1/76 Administration of Chinese Missions" (September 19, 1928–, February 15, 1931).
[48] *CN1/77*.

Church, it was a Catholic who ran ahead to warn the priests.[49] The mission, especially during Hanyang's most violent years, could not have functioned without this assistance.

The value of the laity as protection was understood and altered mission practice. When two priests were left on their own in their respective assignments thanks to a reshuffling of personnel, it was deemed acceptable because "their districts are [...] mainly old Catholics who will give them timely warning of any squalls about to blow".[50] Not only did Catholics provide vital defence against violence they also did essential tasks which missionaries were unable to do. When a priest had been taken hostage by the Red Army, two Catholics were tasked with following the army and carrying a message. However, as anti-foreign violence surged, invites from Catholic communities lessened.[51] Violence altered the practice of mission, which already relied heavily on Chinese labour, by making the Catholic a personal shield for their priest.

Relations between missionary and Catholic could not afford to be crudely managed if missionaries were to maintain those networks which made their precarious work safer. This is perhaps why one priest in 1928 made sure to tell a superior that he felt his assistant "was not as considerate as he should be in his treatment of the Chinese".[52] The arrested development of the mission during the late 1920s and the missionaries' latent sense of superiority was an opening for resentment toward Chinese people to build. A 1931 report on the conditions of the priests found that there was a small cohort of "two or three"

[49] *CN1/151*.
[50] *CN1/76*.
[51] "CN1/103 Director's Visitation Report 1928" (May 2, 1928).
[52] *CN1/103*.

who “indulged in criticisms” of “all things Chinese”.[53] This, the report continued, was no cause for alarm as “no one takes them seriously”.[54] It appears that such critical attitudes were accepted so long as they did not grow within the organisation or spill out beyond private conversions.

[53] “CN1/104 Status Report, and Director’s Visitation Report 1931” (May 4–22, 1931).
[54] *CN1/104*.

Chapter 3

Transactions

On the 6th of August 1922, a deputation of men came to Hanyang from the nearby town of Tsai-Tien. They represented a Protestant community of 50 families and the purpose of their visit was to offer their, en masse, conversion to Catholicism. The Columbans knew things would not always be this easy but it was an encouraging sign.[1] The towns and villages around Hanyang, it seemed, were ripe for harvest. But as they met this deputation in their Hanyang residence, itself a former Baptist mission hospital, they might have felt a seed of doubt; Why would 50 families renounce so quickly their former beliefs? Was it something about Catholicism which motivated them? Or was it simply that they heard a new mission was in the area and wanted to ascertain what it could offer them? Most missionaries were clear-eyed enough to understand that they were first-and-foremost seen by the people as a provider of services.

Mission was, from the beginning, self-consciously posed as a transaction,

[1] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 26.

schools for faith. From this conceit came many of the difficulties of mission work. Somehow from this transaction, true belief must be forged in the convert. Even if 50 families came to your doorstop and professed their faith, you could never be sure why they did it and what they meant by it. All you could do was uphold your end of the bargain. And this is what the Columbans immediately did when that Protestant delegation came. Tsai-Tien had neither chapel nor school, the mission responded by renting a house in the town and appointing a catechist. A year later they had opened two schools with a total of 70 pupils and had plans to open a dispensary.[2] And yet soon the town lost its resident priest, as the mission did not have the personnel to justify keeping him there, and in the following years of anti-Christian agitation many of its converts renounced their faith under pressure.[3] By the 1930s, however, missionaries were working in Tsai-Tien again and the Catholic community was recovering its lost strength. In the story of Tsai-Tien, a general pattern of mission work across the territory is visible. Mission expanded in the early years of the 1920s with an ambitious building program, contracted due to widespread violence and financial strain and then expanded again as the territory calmed.

The missions second period of expansion began in 1931 after a catastrophic flood hit central China killing approximately 2 million people and leaving tens of millions more destitute.[4] In the decade after the flood, conversions soared and the number of Catholics in the mission territory doubled.[5] This surge was caused by a number of factors. Large catuchumenates, full-times schools prepar-

[2]Kelly, *CN1/122*, 4.
[3]"CN1/171 Patrick Maguire Reports" ([c. 1930s]).
[4]Courtney, *The Nature of Disaster in China*, 5.
[5]Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 120.

ing adults for conversion and communion, provided room and board and paid their students a small sum to attend. For the millions displaced by the flood, this was an attractive form of relief.[6] The Columbans' relief work during the flood had generated goodwill. Columbans had had trouble running catuchumenates during the late 1920s. In the countryside they could not attract students who feared they would be targeted for ransom and in the larger town's soldier billeting in churches interrupted their work.[7] But after 1931, the Communists had been violently suppressed and banditry was at a low ebb so there was less danger to associating with the Church.

Conversion was a boon to the mission, yet contained within it a seed of anxiety. Fear of apostasy haunted the missionaries and was fundamental in shaping how they worked. Mission work was physically and psychologically exhausting. Entropy was assumed of faith. As one priest wrote, "it is hard for human nature amid pagan surroundings to live up to Christian ideal".[8] The only solution for which was to physically attend to their flocks whenever possible. Towns, villages, isolated hamlets, all had to be visited with sufficient regularity to keep converts in the church and to keep old Catholics satisfied. This ran parallel with the need to provide regular sacraments. The perceived necessity of oversight and the practical necessity of spiritual services were inseparable. Physical access was a key part of the spiritual bargain offered to the convert. The fullest practice of Catholicism could only be realised with regular or at the very least predictable visits of a priest.

[6] Courtney, *The Nature of Disaster in China*, 232.
[7] "CN1/42 Correspondence Re Finance" (January 15–, December 7, 1927).
[8] *CN1/171*.

To uphold their end of the bargain, missionaries worked themselves ragged travelling across the territory. Priests were consistently out of action due to disease and fatigue. At one point, an administrator in Hanyang commented wryly in a letter to Ireland that it was no good sending “saintly priests” if they were always stuck in a sick bed “propped up with four or five pillows”. The writer further mused that it would be a great help if the seminary could try to recruit some “good hardy lads”.[9] In actual fact there seems to have been little that could prepare a priest for the toil. One missionary, described in a 1927 report as a robust man and a good worker, would a decade later collapse and die on a roadside while travelling home from distant village.[10] The heavy workload was exacerbated by understaffing. Although the initial intent appears to have been that no priest would be assigned without a partner, by the mid 1920s this was no longer practical.[11]

The issue of understaffing was exacerbated by the fact that Chinese catechists were not trusted to properly instruct. It was not the faith of the Catechist that was in doubt, per se, but they were generally seen as possessing a weak understanding of Catholic doctrine.[12] As such missionaries tried as much as possible to supervise these catechists. The problem of distrust in the Chinese catechist was that they were totally necessary for the mission to function. A 1925 report stated that “there [would] be practically no results without catechists and teachers” as “most of the priests in the prefecture at present are not

[9] *CN1/76*.
[10] *CN1/102*.
[11] *CN1/76*.
[12] Kelly, *CN1/121*, 106.

able to give instruction [...] in Chinese".[13] Encouraging signs of interest in the mission from the general populace meant little if there was no one to administer Catholic teaching to them. As one priest put it "bright prospects are only a cause of sadness, to one who has charge of eighteen different parishes. The work is too much for one man".[14]

The distrust of catechists can be seen as an extension of general missionary attitudes toward Chinese Catholics whose faith was taken to be of an almost childlike purity, sincere, imperfect and adorable in its missteps. Such attitudes mixed unfavourably with the Columban's general disinterest in Chinese culture.[15] While they did not exhibit the worst chauvinistic tendencies of their contemporaries, the Columbans, despite having the ultimate goal of creating a native clergy, were remarkably uncreative in imagining what that might entail. Galvin, when faced with the issue of what language seminarians should learn in, stressed that English was the only option. Chinese he wrote was a "quasi-dead" language through which "no decent knowledge [of Catholicism] can be imparted" and without proper English the seminarians would have to sit mute at the dinner table when the Columbans spoke English. This he wrote despite the fact that missionary priests could ostensibly speak Chinese well enough to hear confessions. He further impressed that it would be ideal to mix Chinese and Western seminarians in order to impart upon the Chinese students "a missionary spirit which many Chinese priests lack".[16] Distrust in the Chinese Catholic's ability to learn and teach doctrine clearly ran far deeper than the village cate-

[13] *CN1/40*.
[14] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 55.
[15] Collins, *The Splendid Cause*, 29.
[16] *CN1/76*.

chist.

Just as the priest's physical presence was required for mission work so were buildings needed to undergird the mission's permanence. Schools and chapels were the ways that people interacted with the mission when the missionary was not present. The priest was often a transient figure but the school or the chapel was the mission's permanent emissary. For old Catholics and converts alike, securing a school or chapel appears to have been a primary, if not the primary, goal of their involvement with the mission, so much so that some would even hold back their conversion until they had extracted a promise to build from the missionary.[17] It is important not to cast this as a solely mercenary desire. Spiritual and material concerns cannot be so easily unpicked. Schools had, and were always intended to have, a wider appeal than the Catholic but their purpose was not solely enticement to non-Catholics. If you had converted then sending your children to a Catholic school was not simply a matter of personal advancement, it was a critical expression of faith. Likewise the provision of a suitable place of worship was a spiritual demand which could only be answered in material terms.

A common demand on the mission was for adequate places of worship. When 100 new converts begged their priest for a new chapel to replace that of "mud and straw" in which they currently worshipped, they showed the sincerity of their conversion and the need to have their faith supported materially by the mission.[18] Given the mission's often precarious financial situation, this support was not always forthcoming. In one case, the local Catholics had suc-

[17] *The Far East Magazine*, November, 1924, 196.
[18] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 83.

ceed in scraping together the money for a small plot of land and they asked their priest if he could not build a church for them. His reply was that they all should to pray to St.Joseph that some benefactor would donate the funds.[19] It was a difficult position for the missionary, rather than the preaching, leisurely tea drinking and winning hearts which the mission had been billed as to its first recruits, their success depended on an ability to mete out limited resources to build a material basis for spiritual work.[20][21]

Local chapels were in many cases already in disrepair. Even if they were fixed, they might soon need to be repaired once more. Whether by flooding, anti-Christian furore or billeting soldiers, it was not uncommon for mission buildings to be damaged or destroyed.[22] The maintenance of church infrastructure could not be disregarded, as it broke down so did Catholics fall away, neither could a priest live and work without accommodation. Closing down schools was something done with reluctance, despite being a large expenditure, they were in the mission's view the "one means of keeping alive the little spark of Christianity that has been kindled".[23] It is not necessary to question the sincerity of converts to understand that a Christian community only visited two or three times a year and without a school or a proper space of worship would have difficulty maintaining a connection to the church.[24]

Despite the belief that Catholic converts would lighten the load of the missionary, quite often the opposite was true. Catholics needed spiritual and material

[19] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 63.
[20] *CN1/147*.
[21] *CN1/73*.
[22] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 53.
[23] *CN1/40*.
[24] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 62.

assistance from the mission. What they asked for was nothing unreasonable but in effect meant that every conversion was simultaneously a cost and a benefit.[25] By 1925, the Columbans in Ireland were cautioning their counterparts in Hanyang against "going deeper into the mire" by continuing to build houses and churches.[26] The mission's ambitious programme of expansion had pushed finances to the limit and they had "made up [their] mind not to send one man to any mission, unless forced to do so" until their finances had stabilised.[27] Until a self-supporting native clergy was established, conversion was an enterprise which would stretch mission resources while providing no hope for relief beyond the funnelling of more funds and personnel into the territory. When conversions increased dramatically after 1931, the mission felt it had to respond to the interest of the people despite financial constraints. When the missionaries in Hanyang asked for more money to meet the occasion, the Irish administration were willing to provide it despite difficulties.[28]

Missionaries made do with what limited resources were available to them. In 1935 prominent men from 14 nearby villages presented Fr. Timothy Leahy with documents registering the interest of some 3,000 people in becoming Catholics.[29] What would have, in better financial straits, been a cause for unreserved celebration was a logistical problem for Leahy. He and two other priests were already taking care of more than 4,000 new converts scattered across 32 mission stations each of which needed to be visited regularly. Nonetheless, feel-

[25] Kelly, *CN1/122*, 35.
[26] *CN1/74*.
[27] *CN1/74*.
[28] "CN1/49 Correspondence Re Finance" (May 19–, December 11, 1933).
[29] *CN1/167*.

ing that “it [was] heartbreaking to be forced, for want of a few dollars, to turn such people away”, they decided to increase their workload.[30] To make this possible they hired part-time teachers from the Catholic community at a rate Leahy called “meagre” and established 37 night schools, 32 day schools and a central catechumenate.[31] In the catechumenate, teachers worked from 6am to 10pm instructing hundreds in Catholic doctrine. It appears that when the mission stretched beyond its capacity it relied even more heavily on the labour of Chinese Catholics.

Mission, posed to the Chinese people as a transaction, had trouble changing its premise. Converts having offered their faith, expected it to be supported. Toward converts the church functioned as a body which provided material support in exchange for religious devotion. Among the customary gifts of the mission were prayer books, beads and pictures. The giving of such gifts was deemed important enough that even when there was little money available, it was recognised that it was “not possible to abrogate the custom altogether”.[32] As early as 1925, the mission was exploring how much monetary support they could ask for from their parishioners, an ask they felt was reasonable given that “many of them as pagans contributed a fair amount toward yearly superstitious rites”.[33] The willingness of Catholics to support schools was noted but getting money for the upkeep of priests was a harder sell. One 1926 letter recommended “pressing down the screw gradually and insistently” on parishioners seeing that they had “never been taught their obligation in this matter” and had recently “got such

[30] *CN1/167*.
[31] *CN1/167*.
[32] *CN1/40*.
[33] *CN1/40*.

an idea of the wealth of our society that [money] will be hard to get out of their hands".[34] It was not the case that the laity did not support the mission, they paid to maintain schools, they paid to support priests while they were with them and they paid for prayer books and rosaries, but the mission wanted to shift the cost of maintaining a priest "in a decent way", an expense which in 1928 used up 40% of their budget, over to their parishioners.[35] The implication of the word church was for converts entirely different than in Ireland where it denoted a community mutually supportive and grown over centuries.

[34] *CN1/41*.
[35] *CN1/41*.

Conclusion

Mission work slowed in 1937, when the Japanese invaded. Missionaries in Japanese controlled areas were in 1942 ordered back to Hanyang.[36] There was a resumption of mission work after 1944 which was quickly brought to a close when the Communists won the civil war 5 years later, after which the Columbans were driven from China, some immediately others after a period of imprisonment. Galvin left Hanyang in 1952 under the order of the government.[37] The Columban missionaries left behind the communities they had served and fostered and the religious they had trained. The latter group especially suffered for their connection to the mission. The nuns and priests the Columbans had trained were imprisoned and interrogated. One Fr. Joseph Seng died in a Shanghai prison in 1953.[38] Later some married and melted safely back into the masses, some joined the officially controlled government form of the church and others kept communion with Rome and went underground at great personal risk.

The Columbans had struggled to gain traction against setbacks for about 30

[36]"CN1/161 Unpublished Journals" (1921–1952).
[37]Kelly, *CN1/121*, 181.
[38]Kelly, *CN1/121*, 183.

years before being removed from China for reasons beyond their control. However close they came to Chinese people, however many confessions they heard, masses they gave, charitable works they performed, they never overcame their sense that China existed only for the purpose of conversion, that it was a stage for their spiritual drama. Such attitudes led to a fundamental lack of understanding of the people they served. At times, this was recognised. In 1941, a novice who the mission had put through high school, returned her habit to the mission. "My father couldn't afford to educate me", she said, "so I became a sister. Now I have a high school diploma, so thank you".[39] With that she, a convert of four years, left. Galvin's response was, "after all the years we've been labouring among the Chinese, we don't understand them at all".[40] He then had her habit burned.

The relationship of Chinese people to the Columban missionaries was complex. Many, with good founding, saw mission as simply another form of the ongoing imperial incursion into China. Nonetheless it is clear that many were friendly to the mission and had no qualms about accepting what it offered, when it offered something they wanted. It is important not to discount the experience of Chinese Catholics, whose relation to mission was not subservience but something more complex, they demanded things from the Columbans, often more than the mission could provide and held their faith at much personal risk. Taken from the perspective of relationships it can be said that it was Chinese people themselves who decided what the Columban mission was irrespective of the missionaries' own outlook. The violent and unpredictable landscape of Hubei

[39]Kelly, *CN1/121*, 204.
[40]Kelly, *CN1/121*, 204.

between 1920 and 1950 and the mission's understaffing afforded Catholics and prospective converts a measure of power with the often isolated missionary.

In the 1980s, China opened up to foreign travellers and since then some Columbans have returned to Hanyang, not as missionaries but as visitors. Frs. Tom Glennon and Larry Barnett visited Wuhan in 1986. Here they toured the places where the first missionaries of their order had worked some 60 years before. They took a bus to the countryside to look for an old church. As they searched, they met an old woman who told them that she remembered the priest who had worked there. "He spoke terrible Chinese", she said, "we could hardly understand him!".[41]

[41] Kelly, *CN1/121*, 236.

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