

News Update on Religion and Church in China November 27, 2020 – March 11, 2021

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The “News Update on Religion and Church in China” appears regularly in each issue of Religions & Christianity in Today’s China (RCTC). Since the editorial staff learns of some items only later, it can happen that there are chronological overlaps between “News Updates” of two consecutive issues of RCTC. In these cases stories referred to in earlier “News Updates” will not be repeated. All “News Updates” can be found online at the website of the China-Zentrum (www.china-zentrum.de). – The last “News Update” (RCTC 2021, No. 1, pp. 3-16) covered the period October 1 – December 2, 2020.

Politics in General

December 3, 2020:

Xi Jinping declares the end of absolute poverty in China

When President Xi came to power eight years ago, the fight against absolute poverty was one of the main goals of his government. Xi told the Politburo Standing Committee on December 3 that in the past eight years, the income of almost 100 million people has risen above China’s official poverty line – defined as those who earn less than 11 Yuan (or 1.68 US dollars) a day. According to a report by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the World Bank defines people as extremely poor if they have less than 1.90 US dollars a day at their disposal.

China’s Communist Party describes the overcoming of absolute poverty as a step towards “modest prosperity” for the entire population. In the course of the campaign against poverty, however, tens of millions of people were relocated from remote villages to newly built settlements near cities. Elderly and disabled residents have received cash payments and the government has launched employment programs for people who were previously unemployed or dependent on subsistence farming. In November 2020, China removed the last nine counties, all of which are in Guizhou, from a national list of the poorest counties. In view of slower economic growth and the effects of the Corona pandemic, however, the topic of poverty will continue to accompany China in the future (*Bloomberg* Dec. 4, 2020; *Merics China Briefing* Dec. 10, 2020; www.bmz.de/de/service/glossar/A/armut.html).

Religious Policy

December 2020 to March 2021:

Religions during the Corona pandemic

As reported (cf. *China heute* 2020, No. 2-3, pp. 75-76 [in German]; *RCTC* 2020, No. 4, pp. 5, 11), after the end of the nationwide lockdown, a process of reopening the religious sites lasting several months began in early June 2020. The picture is incomplete for the months of winter 2020/2021. At Christmas, Catholic services were held in various parts of China under preventive measures, as reports from the Catholic website *Xinde* show; in other places, such as Shijiazhuang, they had to be canceled. According to a *China Christian Daily* report on Protestant Christmas services in Beijing, most churches there, including Haidian Church, Gangwashi Church and Fengtai Church, had to move their services online at short notice. The article describes one of the few face-to-face Christmas services in Beijing; it was held under very extensive security measures; photography was prohibited in the church and cell phone signals were blocked.

At the beginning of January 2021, there were COVID-19 outbreaks in the provinces of Hebei (see entry of January 7, 2021 in the section “Catholic Church”), Heilongjiang and Jilin. On January 8, 2021, all 155 religious sites in Beijing were closed. A circular from the State Council on January 18 instructed all provinces to step up prevention due to rising infections and, among other things, to “temporarily cease collective activities in religious sites and to stop illegal religious activities in accordance with the law” in rural areas. In the run-up to the Chinese New Year (February 12), the central government called on the population to avoid traveling as much as possible. An announcement by the Chinese Buddhist Association dated January 27 indicated that, although collective religious activities in temples should be discontinued, temple visits should continue to be possible in a controlled manner. On March 16, 2021, *Xinde* announced that “after Sichuan and Zhejiang, Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Jiangxi, Xi’an in Shaanxi, Baotou and Chifeng in Inner Mongolia have either opened their sites for religious activities one after the other or will open them soon” (*AsiaNews* Jan. 8, 9, 2021; *chinabuddhism.com* Jan. 28, 2021; *chinachristiandaily.com* Dec. 28, 2020 / Jan. 4, 2021; *gov.cn* Jan. 18, 2021; *NZZ* Jan. 4, 2021; *scmp.com* Jan. 8, 2021; *xinde.org* March 16, 2021).

December 4, 2020:

ChinaAid: Elementary school teachers in Wenzhou’s Longwan District had to sign a pledge not to believe in any religion

ChinaAid, a US-based organization, reported that teachers from elementary schools in Longwan District, Wenzhou City, Zhejiang City, were asked to sign a form: “Letter of Commitment for Teachers Not to Believe in a Religion” (教师不信教承诺书). A local source reported that at a meeting on November 30 at their school, teaching staff had to fill out a form that ChinaAid published a photo of. The form contains fields for personal details and a 4-point declaration to be signed. Point 1 obliges the undersigned “to stand firmly in the Marxist conception of religion, to strengthen atheist education and teaching, not to believe in religion, not to take part in any religious activities and not to preach or spread religion anywhere.” The undersigned also undertakes not to participate in “cults” such as Falungong, not to engage in “feudal superstitions” and instead to stand up for socialism and the “mandate to raise people for the party and the state.” According to the source, teachers who belong to the Communist Party had to fill out the form “Obligation for Party Members Not to Believe in a Religion.” According to ChinaAid, 10% of the population of Wenzhou are Christians (*AsiaNews* Dec. 10, 2020; *chinaaid.net* Dec. 12, 2020).

It has been reported before that in some places schoolchildren and their parents had to commit themselves in writing not to take part in religious activities (cf. *RCTC* 2018, No. 4, pp. 8-9; 2020, No. 4, pp. 5-6). For several years there have also been reports from an increasing number of places in China that minors are not allowed to attend church services or take part in religious education.

January 4 / February 21, 2021:

“Central Document No. 1” for the revitalization of rural areas calls for increased action against “illegal religious activities in the countryside”

The first political document of the year 2021 – the “Central Document No. 1” of the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council – deals, like the corresponding documents of previous years, with measures to promote rural development. In Section 25, “Strengthening the Building of a Spiritual Civilization,” there is a sentence on the subject of religion, with only negative connotations; it reads: “According to law and with increased vigor crack down on illegal religious activities and overseas infiltration in rural villages, according to law stop religious intervention in rural public affairs.” The same sentence was already in Document No. 1 of 2018 (see *RCTC* 2018, No. 2, p. 7). First and foremost, section 25 is about deepening ideological education. Among other things, propaganda activities with the motto “Listen to the party, feel the goodness of the party, walk with the party” are to be carried out in the villages – this slogan is omnipresent in the run-up to the 100th anniversary of the CPC’s founding in July 2021. The Chinese peasant civilization is to be given new contemporary content, and rural customs are to be transformed and simplified. Practices such as point-collecting systems, “moral evaluation committees” (*daode pingyihui* 道德评议会) or “red-and-white councils” (*hongbai lishihui* 红白理事会) [the colors stand for wedding and mourning] should be promoted in order to regulate bad customs such as high bridal prices, lavish funerals, waste and “feudal superstition.” Instead, good, simple morals are to be encouraged (The document can be found at www.sara.gov.cn/ywtdt/351548.jhtml, dated Jan. 1, published Feb. 21, 2021; rfa.org Feb. 25, 2021).

January 5, 2021:

Chinese Communist Party publishes Regulations for United Front Work – Party members are not allowed to believe in any religion

The document is a revised version of the first version published in 2015 for trial use. The party’s internal document contains a chapter on “religious work,” i.e., the party’s management of religions. In addition to well-known principles of Chinese religious policy, the chapter (as does the 2015 version) contains the principle: “Members of the Communist Party should unite with the masses of religious believers, but they must not believe in any religion.” Chinese text of the “Regulations for United Front Work of the Chinese Communist Party” 中国共产党统一战线工作条例 at www.xinhuanet.com/politics/zywj/2021-01/05/c_1126949202.htm; a German translation of the chapter on religious work of the regulations can be found in *China heute* 2021, No. 1, pp. 16-17.

February 7, 2021:

Wang Yang welcomes leaders of the official organizations of the religions

At the meeting on the occasion of the upcoming Spring Festival, the chairman of the Political Consultative Conference told the assembled religious leaders: “The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party should be an occasion to continue the beautiful tradition of unity, cooperation and harmony between the religious circles of our nation and the Communist Party of China, to resolutely support the leadership of the Communist Party of China and to continuously promote the ‘five identifications.’” (people.com.cn Feb. 8, 2021).

It appears from many reports that the religions (along with all other sectors of society) are called upon to celebrate the Party on the occasion of its birthday and to show signs of loyalty; cf. the entries of March 8, 2021 in the “Buddhism” section and of February 16, 2021 in the “Catholic Church” section. China’s communist party was established in Shanghai in July 1921.

February 9, 2021:

“Measures for the Administration of Religious Personnel” published

On February 9, the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA) published “Measures for the Administration of Religious Personnel” (hereinafter referred to as “Measures”), which took effect on May 1, 2021. To date there has not been such a comprehensive legal norm for the state administration of this aspect of religious life. The new “Measures” were initially published on November 18, 2020 as a draft for soliciting public opinion (see *RCTC* 2021, No. 1, pp. 4-5, with an initial overview of the content).

The provisions of the very restrictive document require that religious clergy “must adhere to the principle of independence, autonomy and self-government of the religions” (Article 3) and that “Catholic bishops are approved and consecrated by the Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference” (Article 16), a body not recognized by Rome. Massimo Introvigne of *Bitter Winter* called these provisions a “slap in the face of the Vatican.” However, Anthony Lam, a Hong Kong expert on the Catholic Church in China, told the *South China Morning Post* that the Sino-Vatican agreement, which gives the Pope the final say in episcopal appointments, would not be affected.

In the context of the problem that underground Catholic clergy are being pressured by the authorities in many places to sign declarations in support of the principle of independence against their conscience, one change in the final version of the “Measures” compared to the November 18 draft should be noted: Article 13 contains the provision that the national religious organizations lay down the requirements for the recognition of religious personnel of their own religion. However, in the final version, this point was added, “the requirements for recognition must contain the provisions set out in Article 3 of these measures” – including adherence to the principle of independence (text of the “Measures” at www.sara.gov.cn/ywdt/351324.jhtml; English translation and commentary at <https://bitterwinter.org/enter-the-administrative-measures-for-religious-clergy>; scmp.org Feb. 19). A somewhat more detailed account can be found in *China heute* 2021, No. 1, pp. 3-4 (in German).

Daoism

November 27–28, 2020:

10th National Assembly of Representatives of the Chinese Daoist Association (CDA)

The 352 Daoist delegates and 48 guests met in Jurong (Jiangsu) on the Maoshan Mountains. The assembly elected a new leadership team of the CDA: a 204-strong executive committee and a permanent executive committee with 92 members. The Daoist priest Li Guangfu (born 1955), who is also president of the Daoist Association of Wudangshan, was re-elected as president of the CDA. He will be supported by 18 vice presidents in the future. Li Hanying became the secretary general. The statutes of the CDA and other documents were revised, 13 new regulations were passed, including a “Code of Conduct for Daoist Religious Personnel.” Wang Zu’ān, Vice Minister of the CPC’s United Front Department and Director of the National Bureau of Religious Affairs, emphasized in his speech to the National Assembly that the CDA has “restored” the ordination ceremonies of the Quanzhen school and has “further standardized” the liturgy of the conferring of registers (ordination) of the Zhengyi school. As serious problems he named an insufficient inner motivation to advance the Sinicization of Daoism (*sic!*), a lack of discipline in some monasteries, a passion for fortune-telling and Fengshui as well as a generally low “quality” of the clergy. In future, Wang urged the Daoists to promote the “patriotic spirit,” including on the occasion of the centenary of the founding of the CPC; to draw a clear line between “normal religious activities” and “feudal superstitions” and to offer resolute resistance to all “illegal and unlawful activities that make use of Daoism.” He called on Daoism to “keep up with the times” in interpreting its teachings and rules. The “style” of Daoism should be corrected, “the precepts be taken as master” (*yi jie wei shi* 以戒为师). Traditional Daoist precepts and rules (*jielü* 戒律) need to be ordered, simplified and standardized, said Wang. The system for the exclusion from the Daoist clergy needs to be improved and a web-based reference system for excluded persons needs to be set up so that “whoever has violated the precepts (*jie* 戒) in one place will be restricted everywhere” – postulated Wang (sara.gov.cn Dec. 15; taoist.org.cn Dec. 18; zytzb.gov.cn Nov. 30).

The national assemblies are the highest official bodies of the five recognized religions; they meet on a rotating basis every five years. The 9th National Assembly of Daoists took place from June 26-29, 2015 in Beijing; see *RCTC* 2015, No. 3-4, pp. 23-24.

Popular Beliefs

December 21, 2020:

“Measures for the Administration of the Registration and Numbering of Sites for Popular Belief Activities of Guangdong Province” are being adopted

In the People’s Republic of China, for a long time only sites belonging to the recognized “five religions” could acquire legal status by registering with the state. For some time now, the authorities have been trying out methods of officially permitting traditional folk religious practices and incorporating them into the state administration. The first to issue administrative measures for the registration of popular religious sites was the province of Hunan in 2009 (see *China heute* 2011, No. 2, pp. 87-89, 103-106 [in German]).

The “Measures” (广东省民间信仰活动场所登记编号管理办法) adopted by Guangdong Province in December 2021 define popular belief as “phenomena of non-institutionalized belief in which a variety of deities are worshiped with the main purpose of asking for blessings and averting harm that are closely related to traditional customs and that are spontaneously passed on among the people.” Confucius temples (*wenmiao* 文庙) and ancestral halls of clans (*zongzu citang* 宗族祠堂) do not count as sites for popular belief activities in the sense of the “Measures” (Article 2). Sites for popular belief activities that have a land area of at least 500 square meters or a building area of at least 300 square meters or that hold an annual individual activity with at least 1,000 participants must be registered and numbered (*dengji bianhao* 登记编号). Smaller sites are registered and archived but they are not given a number. Like the larger sites, they are to be fed into the “Administrative System for Ethnic and Religious Affairs of Guangdong Province” (Article 4). The village or residents’ committee of the place where the site is located organizes the democratic management body of the site to submit an application to the government at the community level, enclosing the necessary documents (including proof of ownership or right of use of the property). After verification, the government at the community level forwards the application material to the government at the county level, which then issues the corresponding registration certificate (Article 5).

Implementing measures of the City of Ningbo (Zhejiang Province) of November 16, 2020 on the same topic name as criteria which would exclude a site for popular belief activities from registration such things as: “religious personnel lives there permanently” (*sic!*) and “heretical [*xiejiao* 邪教], superstitious or other illegal activities are being carried out there” (documents at http://mzzjw.gd.gov.cn/gkmlpt/content/3/3155/post_3155269.html#617 and www.ningbo.gov.cn/art/2020/11/16/art_1229096003_983380.html).

Buddhism

December 27, 2020:

In the “Tibet Policy and Support Act,” the USA threatens sanctions in the event of the Chinese state interfering in the succession of the Dalai Lama – China rejects this

On December 27, then-US President Donald Trump signed the Tibet Policy and Support Act. The law requires that the succession of Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the Dalai Lama, be left to the Tibetan Buddhists alone. Chinese officials who interfere in the process of selecting Tibetan Buddhist leaders will be subject to sanctions, including refusal to enter the United States. China’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Huang Chunying had already dismissed the bill as a serious violation of the principles of international relations and interference in China’s internal affairs when it was passed by the US House of Representatives on January 28, 2020.

In a long interview with the state news agency *China News Service* published on January 14, 2021, Zhu Weiqun, former vice minister of the CPC’s United Front Department, also rejected the law and reiterated the official Chinese position on the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Zhu said that Tibet and the succession of the Dalai Lama are an internal matter of China. He said that since the beginning of the Dalai lineage, the reincarnation of a Dalai Lama has never been personally decided by the previous one; it must go through a certain process, the core of which is the recognition of the supreme authority of the Chinese central government in matters of reincarnation of Living Buddhas. If the USA and the Dalai Lama claim that only the Dalai Lama himself had the right to determine his successor, and if the next “so-called Dalai” would be created in this way, this could only be a “false Dalai” – Zhu said in the interview (*AsiaNews* Dec. 22, 2020; chinanews.com Jan. 14, 2021; fmprc.gov.cn Jan. 29, 2020).

In 2007 the Chinese government issued “Measures for the Administration of Reincarnations of Living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism.” The now 85-year-old 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso made a detailed statement in 2011 on the question of his reincarnation in which he declared that at the age of around 90 he would decide with other high lamas whether the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama should continue, and if so, would leave clear instructions for the procedure of seeking and recognizing the 15th Dalai Lama. No candidate selected by others, such as the rulers of the People’s Republic of China, should be recognized (German translation of both documents in *China heute* 2007, No. 6, pp. 220f., and 2012, No. 1, pp. 15-20).

January 21, 2021:

Human Rights Watch: 19-year-old Tibetan monk dies after being released from police custody

According to the human rights organization, the monk Tenzin Nyima from the Dza Wonpo monastery in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Ganzi (Kardze) in Sichuan Province was arrested on November 9, 2019 for participating in a brief protest calling for the independence of Tibet. He was released in May 2020 but was arrested again on August 11, presumably for sharing information about his detention online. In October, the prison authorities asked his family to pick him up from prison due to his medical condition. According to information from Tibetans in exile with knowledge of the case, he had been seriously injured, which they attributed to ill-treatment in custody. After unsuccessful attempts at medical treatment, Tenzin Nyima died in January 2021. The trial against him and six other Tibetans involved in the protest (including four monks from Wonpo Monastery) took place on November 10 and 12, 2020 at the Sershul Intermediate People’s Court, according to Human Rights Watch. On December 14, 2020, the six other Tibetans were sentenced to prison terms of one to five years (hrw.org Jan. 21, 2021).

February 5, 2021:

“List of Tibetan Buddhism Rinpoches in Sichuan” published, containing 411 names

According to a press release, which appeared on the website of the Chinese Buddhist Association, the list includes the names of 411 “government-approved Living Buddhas” in the Tibetan areas of the province, including 119 in the Aba (Ngawa) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, 291 in the Ganzi (Kardze) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and 1 in the Muli Tibetan Autonomous County. (For the Chinese word *huofo* 活佛, usually translated as “Living Buddha” in official Chinese documents, the English title of the list uses the Tibetan expression “Rinpoche”.) The list was published by the Communist Party United Front Department, the religious affairs department and the Buddhist Association of Sichuan Province and can be found at www.sctyzx.gov.cn/sczcfjhfm1/default.htm. The database contains the name of the Living Buddha, the school of Tibetan Buddhism and the monastery to which he belongs as well as its location. In contrast to the complete database for living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism in the People’s Republic of China on sara.gov.cn, it is accessible without the user having to register. The press release points out that the television broadcaster CCTV recently exposed some “false Living Buddhas.” Three days earlier, *Xinhua* reported on the case of a Han Chinese in Shenzhen who allegedly obtained a false Tibetan identity and pretended to be a Living Buddha; he “distorted religious teachings to carry out feudal superstitious practices,” enriched himself and endangered the health of people, *Xinhua* said (chinabuddhism.com Feb. 5, 2021; *Xinhua* Feb. 2, 2021).

March 8, 2021:

Jingdezhen Buddhist Association publishes call for activities “Study the Party’s History, Feel the Party’s Kindness, Listen to the Party, Walk with the Party”

In response to the party’s 100th anniversary in 2021 and in response to a speech by Xi Jinping on February 20 in which the CPC General Secretary exhorted everyone to study the party’s history, the Buddhist Association of Jingdezhen (Jiangxi Province) – “under the guidance the United Front Department of the [party] committee of Jingdezhen,” as the Associations appeal says – called on all Buddhists in the city to “study the party’s history, feel the party’s kindness, listen to the party, walk with the party” (学党史, 感党恩, 听党话, 跟党走). The appeal states, among other things: “In the last 100 years our party has led the masses to stand up from a leaky boat, to walk from the brink of collapse towards wealth [...], it has turned the fate of the Chinese nation from downfall to ascension, from suffering to glory. Without a prosperous and strong country, there would be no flourishing of the religious cause. We should always stand firmly in love for the country and religion, know the kindness of the party, feel the kindness of the party, praise the kindness of the party and love and respect the party from the bottom of our hearts” (text of the appeal at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2qm1yHtAVRnxARoUon0mjg>). All official religious organizations have plans to mark the 100th anniversary of the party in July.

Islam

December 8–10, 2020:

Chinese Islamic Association (CIA) holds Hajj work session

On December 1, new governmental “Measures for the Administration of Muslim Hajj Affairs” came into effect (see *China heute* 2020, No. 4, pp. 186-188 [in German]; *RCTC* 2021, No. 1, p. 8). Islamic representatives from different parts of China studied the new legal norm and adapted the system for Hajj work accordingly, the report on the CIA website said. They also discussed punitive measures against Islamic clergy who organize or participate in illegal Hajj pilgrimages. According to state regulations, only the Hajj organized centrally by the CIA is legal. There was also an exchange about how the Hajj organization could be improved under permanent COVID-19 prevention measures. In 2020, Saudi Arabia did not allow foreigners to take part in the Hajj because of the pandemic (chinaislam.net.cn Dec. 17, 2020).

Judaism

December 12, 2020:

Further pressure on Chinese Jews in Kaifeng

After reprisals against the Jewish community in the city of Kaifeng (Henan Province) became known in April 2016, *The Telegraph* reported on December 12, 2020 that there was further pressure on the small community. The paper sees this in connection with President Xi Jinping’s ongoing campaigns against foreign influence and officially unrecognized religions, including Judaism. Around 1,000 people in Kaifeng today claim Jewish heritage, around 100 of whom are believed to be practicing Jews. The Jewish community of Kaifeng emerged in the early Song period (960–1126) and later merged into its Chinese environment through assimilation; the Chinese state does not recognize the Kaifeng Jews as

a religion or an ethnic minority. “It’s government policy,” said a descendant of the Jews in an interview with *The Telegraph*, “their goal is to make sure the next generation doesn’t have any Jewish identity.” The state obviously does not want the Jewish community in Kaifeng to establish relations with Jews abroad. In terms of numbers, they are insignificant, but their existence could “raise a lot of attention among the international Jewish community,” says Noam Urbach of Bar-Ilan University in Israel, who has researched Jews in Kaifeng. In 2016, among other things, the Jewish center in Kaifeng was closed, signs commemorating the historic Jewish community were removed, Jewish tour groups were no longer allowed into the city and community members were monitored by security forces. The Jews practice in secret today, meetings on the Shabbat take place in secret. They also no longer dared to meet to go to a restaurant together, according to a parishioner. Since religious materials are not for sale, they buy Christian Bibles and read the Old Testament in them. However, the suppression is not a form of anti-Semitism, according to Anson Laytner, President of the Sino-Judaic Institute (*The Telegraph* Dec. 12, 2020; see also *RCTC* 2016, No. 3, p. 8 as well as Anson Laytner, “The Changing Status of the Kaifeng Jews”, in: *Points East* 29 (2014) 3, p. 1 and pp. 4-10).

Protestantism

November 26, 2020:

First doctoral exams at the National Theological Seminary in Nanjing

On November 26, Ms. Wang Jiawei and Mr. Luo Chengzan passed their exams at the National Theological Seminary in Nanjing. This makes them the first people to be awarded a doctorate within the framework of the internal church examination system by the Christian Council and the Three-Self Movement. Their doctoral course began in 2016. The degree is not recognized by state universities. Ms. Wang’s work on Christology with Kathryn Tanner was supervised by the director of the Baptist University Hong Kong, Prof. Joshua Cho; Mr. Luo’s work on Athanasius of Alexandria was accompanied by Prof. Miikka Ruokanen, among others. The external specialist supervisors have the status of guest lecturers at the Nanjing Seminar. – On December 20, He Wenbo, Dong Yanhui and Chen Kuangrong passed their exams to obtain the Doctor of Ministry. The doctoral studies accompanying their service within the church began for all three in 2017. Mr. He wrote a study on “Pressure and coping strategies of church leaders in the Yangtze Delta,” Mr. Dong dealt with “Retirement provision for church leaders,” Ms. Chen with “Conflicts and Communication of Middle-Aged Congregation Leaders.” External experts such as Prof. Zhuo Xinping from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences or the head of the Theological Seminary in Fujian, Dr. Yue Qinghua, rounded out the examination committee made up of professors from the Nanjing Seminary (microblog 今日金陵生活 Dec. 2, 26, 2020; njuts.cn).

Isabel Friemann, China Infostelle

Catholic Church

December 22, 2020:

Fr. Peter Liu Genzhu is ordained bishop of Hongdong (Shanxi) with the consent of the government and the Pope – This is the fourth episcopal ordination since the Sino-Vatican Agreement of 2018



The future bishop Peter Liu Genzhu, then still a priest and vicar general, in 2014.
Photo: Maria Lozano.

The ordination of the 54-year-old was presided over by (Arch-)Bishop Meng Ningyou of Taiyuan. Bishops Wu Junwei of Yuncheng, Ding Lingbin of Changzhi and Ma Cunguo of Shuozhou (all Shanxi Province) concelebrated. According to *UCAN*, the letter of appointment from the official Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference read during the ceremony mentioned the candidate's papal appointment. Bishop Liu was elected bishop-candidate on June 10, 2020 following the official Chinese process; his papal appointment was confirmed in November 2020, as reported by *UCAN*. In fact, he had been Rome's candidate for bishopric for many years, as *AsiaNews* wrote. One month earlier, on November 23, Chen Tianhao had been ordained bishop of Qingdao in Shandong Province (cf. *RCTC* 2021, No. 1, pp. 11-12). A Vatican source told *UCAN* that both ordinations were considered "authentic fruits of the [2018] agreement."

Bishop Liu Genzhu was born on June 12, 1966. He studied at the Xi'an Seminary and was ordained a priest in 1991. Since 2010 he has been vicar general of the Diocese of Hongdong/Linfen, which had been without a bishop since 2006. The diocese has around 40,000 Catholics (*AsiaNews* Dec. 22, 2020; *chinacatholic.cn* Dec. 22, 2020; *UCAN* Dec. 23, 2020).

December 30, 2020:

Underground Bishop Han Jingtao of Siping, Jilin, dies

Bishop Andrew Han died at the age of 99. He was born into a Catholic family on July 26, 1921 in Shanwanzi Village, Weichang County, Hebei Province. In his early school years he attended a school directed by Canadian missionaries from Quebec. In 1934 he entered the Minor Seminary in Siping Diocese, and in 1940 he entered the Changchun Seminary. He was ordained a priest on December 14, 1947. With the support of his bishop, Priest Han founded a congregation of Sisters and developed the work of the Legion of Mary in the diocese of Siping. He was arrested in 1953 and spent a total of 27 years in prison and in labor camps. In the early 1980s he was employed as an English teacher at Changchun Normal University and shortly afterwards as an associate professor at Northeast Normal University. At the university he also taught Latin and Greek. In 1982 he was appointed Bishop of Siping by the Pope, but was not consecrated in secret until 1986. Believers called Bishop Han a "giant of culture and faith." Since 1997, Bishop Han was once again under constant surveillance, and the congregation of Sisters was also confronted with convent closings and secret re-openings.

In the early 1980s, the government united all Church districts in Jilin Province into a single diocese, Jilin Diocese. From the perspective of the Vatican, the diocese of Siping continues to exist, it includes parts of the provinces of Jilin, Inner Mongolia and Liaoning. The diocese today has around 30,000 Catholics, including around 20,000 underground and 10,000 in the official Church, as well as 20 priests and around 100 religious Sisters (*AsiaNews* Dec. 31, 2020; Jan. 5, 2020; *Fides* Feb. 23, 2021; http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_500cf6040102yo9r.html).

January 5, 2021:

Death of Bishop Zong Huaide of Sanyuan

The bishop emeritus of the diocese of Sanyuan, Shaanxi Province, died on January 5 at the age of 100. Bishop Zong was born into a poor Catholic family on June 16, 1920 and ordained a priest on June 5, 1949. He spent the years 1965–1980 in prison and in labor camps. In 1983, Zong Huaide became Apostolic Administrator of the diocese, and on August 9, 1987, he was ordained Bishop of Sanyuan. At first he was not recognized by the authorities as a bishop, but has been allowed to work openly since the early 1990s. This made him one of the first underground bishops to be officially recognized. Bishop Zong was held in high regard by both underground Catholics and Catholics in the official Church. He made an important contribution to reconciliation within the Catholic Church in China. On December 23, 1997, Bishop Zong was received in a personal audience by Pope John Paul II. In 2003 he retired. He is succeeded by Bishop Han Yingjin, who was ordained in 2010. Bishop Zong's funeral took place on January 11. Bishop Zong was one of the last great Church leaders of the old generation in China.

January 7, 2021:

The Patriotic Association and the Diocese of Shijiazhuang issue a statement rejecting rumors that the Catholic Church was to blame for the corona outbreak in Hebei

In Hebei Province – which has the highest proportion of Catholics of all provinces in China – there was a major corona outbreak in early January; the provincial capital Shijiazhuang and the city of Xingtai were completely cordoned off. Rumors spread across social media that Catholics were to blame for the outbreak. On January 7, the Patriotic Association and Shijiazhuang Diocese published a statement in which they wrote that individual WeChat accounts and microblogs were deliberately spreading fabricated rumors. According to the statement, one rumor spread on the Internet claimed that Xiaoguo-zhuang in Gaocheng [the district where the first patient in the outbreak came from] is a Catholic village that had religious activities 20 days ago, attended by “many European and American priests” without taking preventive measures, “now you see, these missionaries brought the European virus,” etc. The statement replies that Xiaoguo-zhuang is not a Catholic village, that so far there is only one Catholic among those infected in Shijiazhuang and that, according to the responsible Catholic pastor, there have been no foreign visitors in the area since the winter of the year before. It informed that an official complaint has been lodged against the perpetrators of the rumors.

According to *Jidu shibao* (*Christian Times*), the national TV broadcaster CCTV reported on January 9 that Hebei Province, Shijiazhuang City and Xingtai City had all stated in press conferences about the epidemic that there was no evidence that the outbreak was related to religious activities, and that all religious sites have been temporarily closed.

The United Front Department of Xingtai City issued a notice on January 9 offering a reward for anyone reporting on religious sites that open despite the ordered closure, as well as any “illegal” religious meetings in meeting points and households.

The editorial team of *China heute* saw reader comments posted on the *Renmin ribao* WeChat channel on January 9, under a report on the Hebei Province’s press conference mentioned above. They included comments such as: “Religion just won’t do,” “In some areas, there is a church in every village, that’s terrifying, something should be done about it” and “It’s time to get a grip on religious heretic cults in the underground and Islam, or something bad will happen.” Christian Solidarity Worldwide estimated that over 1,000 such comments were visible for days without being deleted by the censorship (*AsiaNews* Jan. 8, 9, 2021; *csw.org.uk* Feb. 19, 2021; *licas.news* Jan. 11, 2021; *scmp.com* Jan. 8, 2021; *UCAN* Jan. 13, 2021; www.christiantimes.cn/news/33947/天主教就石家庄疫情相关谣言发表严重声明).

January 9, 2021:

More than 50 catechumens are baptized in Huangzhong Parish in Wenzhou, Zhejiang



Baptisms at Wenzhou Cathedral at Christmas of 2020.
Photo: xinde.org.

According to the report on the website of the Catholic newspaper *Xinde (Faith)*, the catechumens – the photo accompanying the report shows adults – had previously completed a five-month baptismal preparation. The parish priest, assisted by 4 other priests, carried out the baptisms. On Christmas Day 2020, 18 people were baptized in Wenzhou Cathedral. At Christmas, baptisms also took place elsewhere, for example, 11 in Jinan Cathedral (Shandong Province). It is unknown whether fewer people than usual were baptized in the Catholic parishes of mainland China in 2020, when the churches were closed for months due to the pandemic, as *Xinde* did not publish any baptism statistics for 2020 (*xinde.org* Dec. 28, 2020; Jan. 14, 2021).

February 16, 2021:

National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA) reports on the “Work Plan 2021” of the official Catholic governing bodies

The text was distributed on *Weixin zongjiao*, the NRAA’s WeChat channel, with the note that it had appeared in print in the January issue of the NRAA’s magazine *Zhongguo zongjiao* and that it was “originally produced by One [Patriotic] Association and One [Episcopal] Conference” – but it cannot be found on the two bodies’ website. Specific projects in 8 areas of activity are named. Under point 1 (“ideological structure”) there is a plan for a conference of Catholic circles to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. The plan is to “unearth moving stories of how Chinese Catholic circles supported the Red Army,” and to publish a book entitled *Catholic Churches Along the Route of the Long March*. “Training courses in cooperation with the Central Institute of Socialism”

for members and co-workers of the patriotic bodies at the provincial level, lay leaders etc. are to be continued. In “key regions” not specified in detail, the election and ordination of bishops should be promoted “actively and reliably” (point 3). Point 4 “construction of theological thinking” contains the implementation of the “7th Forum for Sinicized Theology,” which will deal with the Sinicization of liturgy, art and music. It is also planned to have architecture experts design a series of church building templates that meet the requirements of Sinicization and can be offered to local churches as a reference. Point 7 “exchange with foreign countries” provides for “standardizing work in foreign affairs, maintaining strict discipline in foreign affairs and revising and improving the system for foreign affairs” (*Weixin zongjiao* Feb. 2, 2021 at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/EuUKoOOyTKfLy6hLO4OzSQ>). – For more details see *China heute* 2021, No. 2, pp. 4-5 (in German).

February 19 – March 25, 2021:

AsiaNews: Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Yining, Xinjiang, not demolished in spite of order of the local authorities

AsiaNews reported in February that believers had to clear the church on February 19 as authorities ordered it demolished. The authorities ordered the demolition even though the church had all the necessary permits from the religious bureau and gave no reasons for doing so; it is assumed that the land was to be used for construction projects. On March 25, *AsiaNews* reported that the church has not been destroyed after all, probably because (as one Catholic from Yining told the news agency) *AsiaNews*' article put some pressure on the local authorities, and the destruction activities had also been curbed by a directive from the central government that warned against land seizures to avoid reactions from the population. However, according to the second *AsiaNews* report, “the church of Yining remains impossible to use. First of all because the faithful, in anticipation of the demolition, took away all the furnishings and decorations, leaving the bare building. In addition, the government, which had begun the demolition, cut off electricity, water and other services.” The local authority said in March it would cover the costs of restoring the building.

Earlier, in 2018, Christian reliefs, two statues and the cross of the church had been dismantled (cf. *RCTC* 2018, No. 2, pp. 19-20).

According to *AsiaNews*, 2,000 Catholics, some of them descendants of exiles from the time of the Qing Empire, live in the Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of Yili, the capital of which is Yining. According to the news agency, at least four other Catholic churches in Xinjiang have been destroyed in recent years: one each in Hami and Kuitun and two churches in Tacheng. The churches had the necessary permits and received no compensation (*AsiaNews* Feb. 19, March 25, 2021).

Sino-Vatican Relations

January 29, 2021:

Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin in an interview: “I respect anyone who criticizes the Holy See’s policy on China”

In an interview with the French broadcaster KTO on January 29, the cardinal also spoke about the Holy See’s China policy, he said: “I would say first of all that I deeply respect anyone who has a different opinion and who criticizes, let’s say, criticizes the Holy See’s policy on China. And it’s a right to do so because it’s an extremely complex and difficult situation. There can be different points of view. We decided this path of ‘small steps’ – it’s true that there has been work done before, but there was a great im-

petus from Pope Francis. Also take into account that this agreement was not intended to be, and could not be, an agreement to resolve all the problems that the Church faces in China, but simply a small step from which to start, to seek to improve the situation of the Church. So there is no claim that this is the ‘final word.’” Parolin compared the agreement to a small seed “which, we hope, with the grace of God and the good will of each one, will be able to grow and bear fruit. This is our hope. And it requires a lot of patience. A lot of patience.” (www.ktotv.com/article/entretien-exclusif-avec-le-cardinal-pietro-parolin-secretaire-detat-du-saint-siege, quoted here from ncregister.com Jan. 1, 2021).

February 8, 2021:

Pope Francis speaks about China in his address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See

In his address to the assembled ambassadors, the Pope also spoke about international agreements concluded last year; in connection with this, he said: “Additionally, on 22 October 2020, the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China agreed to extend for another two years the Provisional Agreement regarding the Appointment of Bishops in China, signed in Beijing in 2018. The agreement is essentially pastoral in nature, and the Holy See is confident that the process now begun can be pursued in a spirit of mutual respect and trust, and thus further contribute to the resolution of questions of common interest”.

(www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2021/february/documents/papa-francesco_20210208_corpo-diplomatico.html; *UCAN* Feb. 11, 2020).

Hong Kong

December 7, 2020:

Hong Kong freezes church accounts

On December 7, by order of the police, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (HKSB) froze the accounts of the Good Neighbor North District Church, allegedly for tax evasion and money laundering. Since parishioners and pastors are known for their support of the pro-democracy demonstrations, political reasons are suspected behind this measure. The new security law allows law enforcement officers to intervene without providing sufficient evidence. Dozens of charities and welfare organizations in Hong Kong have protested the freezing of the community’s accounts and campaigned for the Good Neighbor North District Church to continue its social services to the marginalized and the homeless. At least 100 homeless people, social workers and church workers are affected by the measure. Pastor Wu Chi Wai speaks of a message addressed to all Christian communities reminding them not to be politically active (*AsiaNews* Dec. 14, 2020).

Isabel Friemann, China Infostelle

February 4, 2021:

Primary school pupils should already receive instruction on the safety law

The Hong Kong Education Bureau published new guidelines on February 4 to implement the national safety law in primary and secondary schools, which came into force on June 30, 2020. It becomes

part of the curriculum, but goes way beyond that. The guidelines cover every aspect of the school system, from management to classroom content to student behavior, even out-of-school, according to the *South China Morning Post*. As part of the campaign, the government launched an animated film in which a wise owl teaches children what patriotism, loyalty and strictly obeying the law mean. The guidelines state, among other things, that teachers should make it clear that “safeguarding national security is the responsibility of all nationals and that as far as national security is concerned, there is no room for debate or compromise.” Ip Kin-yuen, president of the teachers’ union, said the guidelines would create uncertainty and anxiety among teachers and enforce a “restrictive and suppressive” education style that would prevent students from developing and thinking independently, according to *Reuters*. Hong Kong’s Minister of Education, Kevin Yeung, told the press that the curriculum changes were aimed at creating a national identity. Primary school students should internalize that they are Hong Kong citizens and Chinese at the same time. Audiobooks and picture books have been developed for primary school and the pupils have to learn the text of the Chinese national anthem “and internalize how to behave respectfully when it is played,” according to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. “In the further course of primary school, the young Hong Kongers should learn which four offenses pose a threat to national security: they are about secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign powers. In the secondary school, in addition to the 15-hour learning module on the Chinese constitution and the Hong Kong constitution, there will be a three-hour supplement to the law on national security” (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung* Feb. 8, 2021, there was also the video; *Reuters* Feb. 5, 2021; www.scmp.com/video/hong-kong/3121229/hong-kong-teach-new-national-security-law-classrooms Feb. 2, 2021).

February 5, 2021:

Chinese New Year: Leaders of the six religions send greetings for the Year of the Ox

In their annual New Year message, the Colloquium of the Six Religious Leaders in Hong Kong sent greetings and prayers to residents. The signatories are Most Ven. Kuan Yun, President of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association; Cardinal John Tong, Apostolic Administrator of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong; Dr. Tong Yun-Kai, President of the Confucian Academy; Ibrahim Sat Che-Sang, Chairman of the Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association; Rev. Dr. Eric So Shing-Yit, Chairman of the Hong Kong Christian Council; and Leung Tak-Wah, Chairman of the Hong Kong Taoist Association. In their message, the focus is on the Covid-19 pandemic, which has also affected Hong Kong. At the end of the letter they summarize their wishes as follows: “... that the epidemic vanish soon and our daily life return to normal; that our country grow more prosperous and powerful and all people be happy; and that Hong Kong society enjoy social harmony, prosperity and stability” (*Sunday Examiner* Feb. 5, 2021).

February 28, 2021 / March 15, 2021:

47 pro-democratic activists remain in custody for the time being

47 politicians and activists – the leadership of the pro-democratic opposition in Hong Kong – initially remained in custody after four days of hearings in early March. The trial is expected to resume on May 31. Many supporters had gathered outside the courthouse in West Kowloon, including Cardinal Josef Zen. Diplomats from Great Britain, the USA, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands, among others, also asked in vain to be admitted to the courtroom. The defendants were arrested on February 28 on charges of violating the national security law and have now been charged. The group (53 people at the

time) was first arrested in January and released. Some have been in custody for a longer time for other alleged offenses, such as the prominent opposition activist Joshua Wong. The democratic politicians are accused of holding “illegal” primaries in July of last year for the parliamentary election, which was later canceled due to the Corona pandemic. In these primaries, pro-democratic candidates were selected. This was a “threat to the state.” About 600,000 Hong Kong residents took part in the primaries. The national security law provides for up to life imprisonment depending on the offense. In the meantime, as of March 15, 2021, 11 of the defendants have been released on bail.

The well-known Hong Kong publisher and democracy activist Jimmy Lai is still in custody, also charged with accusations under the security law. His trial is scheduled to begin in mid-April.

On February 25, the Chinese University of Hong Kong announced that it would end its relations with the Student Union, whose new leaders are accused of making “false” statements that threatened national security, according to *AsiaNews*. Students who incite “illegal behavior” would be suspended or expelled (*AsiaNews* Feb. 12, 26; March 1, 3, 2021; *LICAS* March 15, 2021; *Der Spiegel* March 4, 2021; *Süddeutsche Zeitung* March 1, 2021; *Die Welt* Feb. 17, 2021).

March 11, 2021:

Beijing adopts electoral reform, thereby increasing control over Hong Kong

At the annual meeting of the Chinese People’s Congress, the Chinese government passed a legal reform for Hong Kong, according to which Beijing wants to examine and control the political sentiments of all election candidates and to redefine the districts for the election of the Hong Kong Legislative Council. According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi on March 7, the changes are “Hong Kong’s transition from chaos to governance,” according to the *Spiegel*. The transition is “in the full interest of all parties” because loving Hong Kong and patriotism were exactly the same thing. The Hong Kong media – according to *Die Zeit* as of March 11 – reported that the committee for the election of the Hong Kong Chief Executive would be enlarged from 1,200 to 1,500 members. In the future, the Election Committee would also decide who is allowed to run in the parliamentary elections, “which means that candidates would indirectly depend on Beijing’s approval.” According to the reports, the Hong Kong Legislative Council should be enlarged from 70 to 90 seats.

This is a further step to marginalize the forces close to democracy (*Der Spiegel* March 7, 2021; *Die Zeit* March 11, 2021).

Taiwan

February 8, 2021:

Pope Francis greets Taiwan on the Chinese New Year

On the sidelines of this year’s New Year’s Reception for the Holy See Accredited Diplomatic Corps, Taiwan’s Ambassador to the Holy See, Matthew S.M. Lee, conveyed to the Pope New Year greetings on behalf of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and all of the Taiwanese people. According to a report from *UCAN*, Lee said, “the Pope was in good spirits, wished a good start to the lunar year and promised to continue to pray for Taiwan.” In January, President Tsai sent a letter to Pope Francis in response to his message for the 54th World Day of Peace on January 1. In the letter she mentions, among other things, how Taiwan, which is only slightly affected by the Corona pandemic, expressed global solidarity and sent tens of millions of medical masks and protective clothing to Central and South America, Asia, the

EU and the USA. It also commemorates the humanitarian efforts of Ambassador Matthew Lee, who distributed food and blankets to the homeless on the Taiwanese National Day in October in Rome. At the same time, she expressed her displeasure that the 23 million Taiwanese are still excluded from the World Health Organization.

For years, the PR China has prevented the island from being granted observer status or even membership in the WHO (*AsiaNews* Jan. 1, 2021; *FAZ* April 4, 2020; *UCAN* Feb. 2, 2021; <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6093>; see also *RCTC* 2021, No. 1, p. 16).

February 6, 11, 2021:

Taiwan: Sino-Burmese protest against the military coup in Myanmar

Wearing red, the color of the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi, 300 people demonstrated on February 6 in “Little Burma” in New Taipei’s Zhonghe District against the military coup in Myanmar on February 1. Ko Ko Thu, 54, who fled to Taiwan after the 1988 bloodily suppressed protests and helped organize the Taipei rally, told the *Taipei Times* on February 7: “Taiwan is a very democratic country. I hope that in the future, even if I am dead, that Myanmar can be democratic like Taiwan.”

In “Little Burma” near the Nanshijiao metro station on Huaxin Street – the signs in the Burmese language on the facades of the shops shape the atmosphere there – around 40,000 immigrants from Burma, most of them ethnic Chinese, have settled in the last few decades, reports *Diplomat Brief* of March 18, 2017. Many are descendants of Kuomintang members who fled to Burma (now Myanmar) at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 in the fight against the communist guerrillas and were initially stuck there after Chiang Kai-shek sought refuge in Taiwan. In 1954, after the recapture of China had proven hopeless, an estimated 7,000 soldiers and their descendants were repatriated to Taiwan. Others have fled Myanmar in recent years due to repression and anti-Chinese resentment. At first, many found it difficult to get used to local life and languages, the Taiwanese dialect and Mandarin. Trade between the two countries is now flourishing and over 200 Taiwanese companies operate in Myanmar.

Thousands of members of the Christian minorities in Buddhist Myanmar, including priests and women religious, took part in the protests in Myanmar, which have been going on since February 1 and against which the military is using ever greater violence. The Archbishop of Rangoon, Cardinal Charles Bo, also called several times for non-violent protests against the military coup.

According to estimates, the population of Myanmar is around 54.5 million. According to a 2014 census, the religions are divided as follows: Buddhism 87.9%, Christianity 6.2%, Islam 4.3%, Hinduism 0.5%, popular tribal beliefs 0.8%, others 0.2% and without religion 0.1%. According to a report from *UCAN* on November 20, 2020, the 750,000 Catholics occupy a modest place.

Willi Boehl

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