

## “The Monastery Will Be a Chinese House”: The Inculturation of the Church in China from the Perspective of the History of Catholic Monasticism

Matteo Nicolini-Zani

### 1. Introduction

The history of the Christian monastic presence in China between the nineteenth and the twentieth century offers a peculiar, even if still neglected or undervalued, perspective on the process of inculturation of the Catholic Church in China in history.<sup>1</sup> Reviewing some pages of this history through the lens of inculturation would offer stimulating insights from the past of the Catholic Church in China to the contemporary Chinese Catholic Church.

In China like elsewhere, the monastic life has been and should be an essential part of the life of the Church and participates in its mission of evangelization. The inseparability of monastic life and the mission of the Church has been reiterated and developed in the years following Vatican II, with emphasis on community life as the specific form of monastic witness.<sup>2</sup> Contemplation and mission are inseparable. In this perspective, monasteries are both places of contemplation and places of activity and of mission, not in the sense that they allow themselves to become involved in the pastoral activities of the Church, but in the sense that they are places in which prayer is at the core of the Christian life and in which silence and listening offer a pedagogy to those who seek regeneration or who want to explore their own interior world.

This is the mission entrusted to the monastics in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, which deals specifically with institutes of consecrated life in the Catholic Church: “Monasteries are like nurseries of edification for the Christian people.”<sup>3</sup> Through liturgy and

1 This is the English original (provided by the author) of the paper presented in Chinese at the Conference “Matteo Ricci and Nanchang: Inculturation of the Church in China,” held at Nanchang 南昌 (Jiangxi 江西) on March 28–29, 2017. For an outline history of the Christian monastic foundation in China, see: Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *Christian Monks on Chinese Soil. A History of Monastic Missions to China*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press 2016.

2 Cf. José Cristo Rey García Paredes, “Missione,” in: Angel Aparicio Rodríguez – Joan María Canal Casas (eds.), *Dizionario teologico della vita consacrata*, Milan: Ancora 1994, pp. 1038-1063, here 1049. Cf. also the summary of the theology of the contemplative/monastic life given in Jean Leclercq, “Monachisme chrétien et missions,” in: *Studia Missionalia* 28 (1979), pp. 133-152, in particular pp. 142-147.

3 Vatican Council II, *Perfectae Caritatis* 9; also found in: John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* 8.

hospitality, contemplation becomes activity and mission. Monasticism, therefore, insofar as it is an ecclesial entity, partakes of the Church's intrinsically missionary nature. To put it another way, monasticism participates in the life of the Church, which is in itself mission.<sup>4</sup>

Over time there was a better understanding that “the role of monasticism is to bring monastic life to the missions, with all that it entails for the life of a Church, and not to do something else there.”<sup>5</sup> As this point became even clearer, attention was also given to the question of the inculturation of monasticism in other cultural and spiritual settings, or, in the words of the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church of the Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* (1965), the question of how to live monastic life “in a way accommodated to the truly religious traditions of the people.”<sup>6</sup> This issue involves a reflection on how a monastery in a particular land shall become a place where those whom God has called to the monastic life can experience and live out the monastic life in their own country according to the cultural, religious, and spiritual forms that are most congenial to them.

Among the many voices involved in this reflection I will here mention briefly only that of the Benedictine Théodore Nève (1879–1963), abbot of the Abbey of Saint Andrew in Belgium, who was involved in the enterprise of establishing a monastery in China. He emphasized that monastic life can only be missionary if it radically lives out the *forma vitae*, the form of life that is proper to coenobites. Starting out from this fundamental conviction, Abbot Nève outlined the elements that a monastery in mission must ensure so that “it can be planted and sprout,” that is, become autonomous. Such autonomy, correctly interpreted, is in fact the ultimate goal, for it is the sign that a community has roots and will develop.

*What, then is the role of monasticism in mission lands today? First of all, it must be planted and sprout. The apostolic movement that urges a monastery to found others does not have for its object the establishment of branches of the mother-house, but rather the establishment of new families, which, in the measure that they have their own recruitment, become autonomous.*<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Toward a Chinese Christian Monasticism

With this missiological and monastic reflection in the background, we can better understand the courageous establishment of several communities and monastic orders on Chi-

4 Cf. Sandra Mazzolini, “Missione e monachesimo. Una prospettiva missiologica,” in: Conrad Leyser – Hannah Williams (eds.), *Mission and Monasticism. Acts of the International Symposium at the Pontifical Athenaeum S. Anselmo, Rome, May 7–9, 2009*, Rome: Pontificio Ateneo Sant’Anselmo – Sankt Ottilien: EOS 2013, pp. 197–210, in particular pp. 203–204.

5 Leclercq, “Monachisme chrétien et missions,” p. 146.

6 Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes* 40.

7 Théodore Nève, “De la fondation de monastères en terre de mission,” in: *Autour du problème de l'adaptation. Compte rendu de la quatrième semaine de missiologie de Louvain (1926)*, Louvain: Éditions du Museum Lessianum 1926, pp. 36–46, here p. 40.

nese soil in a period between roughly 1869, the year of the founding of the first Carmel on Chinese soil, and 1955, the year when the last foreign nuns were forced to leave China. Carmelites, Trappists, and Benedictines had a fruitful life in modern China. With them, the half-monastic and half-apostolic religious families of the Chinese Little Brothers of Saint John the Baptist and the Little Sisters of Therese of the Child Jesus, founded by Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940), gave a luminous witness to the possibility of giving birth to a Catholic monasticism with Chinese features.

I would like to summarize briefly the reflections of some of the persons who were directly or indirectly involved in helping to initiate and then to continue the relations between that part of the Church that is monasticism and Chinese culture. Starting from the 1920s, for the first time in the history of Catholic missiology consideration was given to the prospect of a “Chinese Christian monasticism,”<sup>8</sup> and the reflection focused mainly on the compatibility of Christian monasticism with the spirituality of China and the possibility of Christian monastic life taking root in Chinese soil.

For this to happen, it was necessary above all that the monks be and remain Chinese. The statement may seem obvious, but in fact for many years in mission countries candidates for the monastic life, and for religious life in general, were expected to separate themselves from their cultural roots and assume, if possible, those forms of religious life that had been developed in the West and were transplanted without change to mission lands.

The ultimate goal of this process of “indigenization” was that over time the entire monastic community, including the superior, should be Chinese. “It is more natural and more in keeping with the Catholic spirit that a monastery be governed by a superior from that country, and this is what we must strive for,” wrote Louis Brun (1876–1942), the abbot of the Trappist abbey of Our Lady of Consolation in Yangjiaping 楊家坪.<sup>9</sup>

The question that, for the most part, remained in the background was: “In what way should the encounter between Western monastic life and the local cultural context take place?” In other words, just how should one go about the process of “adaptation,” or “inculturation,” as it was later called?

Although it was certainly necessary to start from the Christian monastic tradition that had been developed up to that point west of China, this tradition, stripped down to essential elements, in other words, stripped as much as possible of specifically Western cultural elements, was now carried over, transported, and delivered to the Chinese context, because that would allow it to be reborn in a “new form.”

In the 1920s and 1930s this requirement became clear to the founders and leaders of the monastic communities who were already present in China. Among the Trappists, for example, this readiness to adapt was particularly evident at the time of the first monastic foundations in the Far East. The history of the first foundations in the Far East gradually

8 “For a Chinese [Christian] Monasticism” was the title of an editorial in the *Bulletin des Missions* of 1927 (“Pour un monachisme chinois,” in: *Bulletin des Missions* 8 [1926–1927], p. 257).

9 Louis Brun, “La vie contemplative en Chine,” in: Alphonse Hubrecht, *Une trappe en Chine*, Peking: Imprimerie des Lazaristes 1933, p. 95.

taught the Trappists to confront the necessity of adaptation and to understand what Louis-Brun wrote in the 1930s.

*Although the monastery depends on an order and is bound through its mother-house with the Abbey of Cîteaux, [... it] is, nevertheless, a local and autonomous institution, which, transplanted from another place, must put out its roots in and be nourished by elements of the place where it finds itself and thus become a natural product of it [...] The adaptation of Catholic monasticism to China, so that it becomes a natural product, cannot be the work of one day.<sup>10</sup>*

In the Benedictine world, Abbot Théodore Nève stated that what guarantees that a foundation will be able to “adapt” to the context in which it is located is its degree of autonomy and that the visible manifestation of this “adaptation” is “constructing a monastery in the style of the country in which it is built” and, above all, that the novitiate is “open and adapted to indigenous vocations.”

*A monastery, in order to be a monastery, must plunge its roots into the deep strata of the soil on which it builds. As long as a monastery in a mission country lives only thanks to the continual addition of European blood, its life is precarious. Sooner or later our monasteries must become indigenous [...] Thanks to this the monks and the abbot will quickly become natives and then they will be able to fine-tune regional adaptations of observance, to which the general lines of the monastic rule leave enough space so that it can really be a garb made to measure.<sup>11</sup>*

The most prophetic Benedictine voice to speak in favour of the adaptation of Christian monasticism in China was undoubtedly that of Jehan Joliet (1870–1937), whose project for a monastery that would be genuinely Chinese showed that he did not want “to import from the West a monasticism that was ‘already complete’ and apply it to China; rather, China, on its own, should restart the Christian monastic experience, and itself draw on the essential principles of the Rule of St. Benedict to produce a monasticism that is authentically Chinese.”<sup>12</sup> Joliet was well aware of the daring nature of the task, as he confessed in a letter of 1928:

*It is not to be thought that a real adaptation in practice, not one in letters and speeches, will be easy or agreeable. It is an effort continually renewed; it demands renunciation in many ways harder and more complete than that of religious vows because it is exercised in a field to which one has not vowed oneself explicitly and against which may arise the opposition of a holy and necessary sentiment of attachment to the customs of one’s original community.<sup>13</sup>*

This task was all the more difficult to realize because, as Joliet recognized when he wrote to Abbot Nève two years later, it called on the Western monastic, and particularly Bene-

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96 and 103.

11 Nève, “De la fondation de monastères en terre de mission,” pp. 43-44.

12 Henri-Philippe Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet (1870–1937). Un projet de monachisme bénédictin chinois*, Paris: Cerf 1988, p. 197.

13 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Édouard Neut, 2 October 1928, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, pp. 161-162.

dictine, tradition to do away with the “Latin habit” that had been worn for centuries, and to put on a “Chinese habit.”

*I know the present discipline of the Benedictine Order, but I believed that we were in China in order to adapt ourselves [...] Gradually, more and more you want to have us copy what is done in Europe, in order to bring to [the Chinese] an up-to-date version, a ready habit, a modern ensemble of Western monasticism of the twentieth century, while the points of contact and of suture between China and monasticism lie much more in antiquity.<sup>14</sup>*

The desire to resolve this basic tension seemed to motivate all Joliet’s labours in China. As he bitterly noted, and as the events occurred to the monastery of Xishan 西山 show, the degree of freedom and autonomy that Joliet felt was needed in order to implement his proposal for a Chinese form of monasticism was not always understood, and consequently not always granted, by superiors. He believed that if monasticism was to remain faithful to its own vocation it had to be “without works.” A monastic presence in China, therefore, ought to remain without a direct mission, and monastic identity in China was not to be overshadowed by a missionary identity. Jehan Joliet believed that only in this way could the monastery fulfil its true function in China: “To be, through its capacity for intellectual and spiritual stimulation, a place of encounter and osmosis between Chinese culture and the Gospel.”<sup>15</sup>

### 3. The Benedictine Monastery of Xishan (Sichuan): A Case Study

To show the difficult tension between tradition and innovation, western models and Chinese adaptations, institutional frames and space for freedom, we will focus on the case of the Benedictine monastery of Xishan, Sichuan.

Had it not been for Jehan Joliet, a French Benedictine monk of Solesmes, no one would have conceived, awaited, and finally realized an authentic, at least as proposed, Chinese Benedictine monastery, which, even though founded by foreigners, would be “with its prominent Chinese character [...] in every aspect a Chinese house,” as wrote Joliet himself.<sup>16</sup> When the founder of the monastery of Xishan died, its prior, Raphaël Vinciarelli, summed up the essential character of this man and his work.

*Dom Joliet’s personality was full of energy, entirely at the service of an idea that had matured over thirty years and that he was able to bring to life. To introduce*

14 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Théodore Nève, 27 November 1930, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, pp. 202-203.

15 Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 306.

16 Jehan Joliet, “A Project for a Chinese Monastery (1922),” in: Nicolini-Zani, *Christian Monks on Chinese Soil*, Appendix 2, pp. 321-325, here p. 325. On the person of Jehan Joliet, see especially the biography of Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*. See also: Un moine de Saint-André, “Dom Jehan Joliet,” in: *Les Cahiers de Saint-André* 1 (1938) 1, pp. 30-52 (also republished as a pamphlet); Raphaël Vinciarelli, “Dom Jehan Joliet et son œuvre monastique en Chine,” in: *Contemplation et Apostolat* 1938, no. 10, pp. 6\*-11\*; “Dom Jehan Joliet,” in: *Bulletin M.E.P.* 1938, pp. 245-247; Henri-Philippe Delcourt, “Dom Jehan Joliet (1870-1937). Un projet de monachisme bénédictin chinois,” in: *Mélanges de science religieuse* 43 (1986) 1, pp. 3-19; Henri-Philippe Delcourt, “The Grain Dies in China,” in: *AIM Bulletin* 1986, no. 40, pp. 45-55.

*in China a monastic life whose roots would seek the original currents of Chinese civilization: this was his aim, this is Si-Shan [Xishan].<sup>17</sup>*



Hebachang 河坝场, major seminary, September 1937. Jehan Joliet, first prior of Xishan 西山 (centre), with Raphaël Vinciarelli, third prior (right), and Vincent Martin (left). Photo: Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries (Saint-André), Bruges.

The years from 1917 to 1926 were a period of slow incubation of the “Chinese dream” of Jehan Joliet. During that time what was happening in Joliet’s personal life and in the Church brought about a maturation of his China project, but his vision remained basically the same:

*[My project] is the foundation of a monastery in China with the same orientation of life as at Solesmes, that is, first of all the Divine Office and prayer, normally without a ministry or travels, and intellectual work as the principal work. But there is no monastery without monks, and naturally what will be necessary in the end will be Chinese monks, and to have true Chinese monks, it is necessary that the foundation, made entirely by Europeans, adopt resolutely and clearly everything from China except sin.<sup>18</sup>*

The project was extremely clear for him from the very beginning, but, provided that the monastery will be a Chinese monastery, no plans were arranged in advance. In 1924 Joliet wrote: “My dream would be to go there with the fewest possible precise projects for or against a form or a work [...] What I hope is that there be no haste, that decisions aren’t made before living there.”<sup>19</sup>

However, Joliet’s dream about China would not have come true if he had not found a monastic community willing to carry out his plan on Chinese soil and to provide the necessary personnel and means. In Belgium the Abbey of Saint Andrew was the monastery most naturally suited to the monastic missionary project that Joliet had cultivated and refined over the years. Finally, in 1927, after almost thirty years silently waiting and praying for this day, Joliet’s dream became a reality. Théodore Nève, abbot of Saint Andrew, first informed Celso Costantini, the apostolic delegate in China (1922–1933), of the decision

17 Vinciarelli, “Dom Jehan Joliet et son œuvre monastique en Chine,” p. 6\*.

18 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Charles Rey, 30 August 1917, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 69.

19 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Charles Rey, 3 August 1924, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 88.

with a letter that is worth citing, since it shows that in this first phase Nève and Joliet had a substantially similar vision. It also demonstrates consonance with the missionary ideal of Costantini.

*We would like to bring Benedictine monastic life to the Chinese and to found a monastery in a native vicariate [...] We would like this monastery to adapt itself as well as possible to Chinese customs. The Rule of St. Benedict is sufficiently broad to permit this adaptation naturally [...] The Lord will indicate the time when we can send Fr. Joliet the help that he will need [...] so as to allow him to form quickly a local community in which the European fathers will have no other desire but to be Chinese with the Chinese.*<sup>20</sup>

The same tune is found in the words of Abbot Nève addressed to two Belgian monks leaving for China in 1928: “Become Chinese with the Chinese. Try to adapt yourselves to the uses and customs of the country, doing so to the extent that you judge appropriate and prudent.”<sup>21</sup>

This, of course, was based on the ground of a clear consciousness, namely that, for a monastery, the first duty for being a part of the body of the Church is to be faithful to its nature, the same nature in China as elsewhere. There is no monastic life without genuine fraternal life and communal liturgical prayer. But the main issues and tensions at stake in this process of adaptation to the Chinese context were many and different, such as the architecture of the new-built monastery, the formation given to Chinese postulants and novices and the liturgy performed by the community. Let us consider these issues briefly.



Xishan 西山, 1932.

The Benedictine priory of Sts. Peter and Andrew, seen from the north. In the foreground, the rectangular building that housed the novitiate, monastic refectory, chapter room, cloakroom, library, and monastic cells. Behind it, the chapel (right) and guest parlours (left).

Photo: Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries (Saint-André), Bruges.

20 Letter of Théodore Nève to Celso Costantini, 15 February 1927, in: Christian Papeians de Morchoven, *Labbaye de Saint-André Zevenkerken*, vol. 2: *Un défi relevé par dom Théodore Nève*, Tiel: Lannoo 2002, p. 192.

21 Cited in: Papeians de Morchoven, *Labbaye de Saint-André Zevenkerken*, vol. 2, pp. 203-204.

Regarding the building of the monastery, photos better than words can show what was done at that time in Xishan. “Nothing great,” as it was written, “but in very good taste and completely in local style.”<sup>22</sup> The building, whose architecture was inspired by the layout of traditional Chinese houses, consisted of two rectangular buildings that were twenty meters long and had black tiled roofs. The first building was primarily for hospitality, with a reception hall, visiting rooms, and guest rooms. In the back was the chapel, with altars decorated in Chinese style, and the sacristy, where there was a reliquary of St. Therese of



Xishan 西山, 1932.

Above: The exterior of the reception centre for guests at the priory of Sts. Peter and Andrew. Photo: Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries (Saint-André), Bruges.



Left: The Chinese-style chapel of the priory of Sts. Peter and Andrew. Photo: Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries (Saint-André), Bruges.

22 Un moine de Saint-André, “Dom Jehan Joliet,” p. 11.



the Child Jesus, the design of which was also Chinese. The second building contained the various monastic areas: chapter hall, refectory, recreation room, and monastic cells. The surrounding land, enclosed by a wall, included a garden, a grove of fruit trees (oranges, tangerines, and peaches), and a vineyard.<sup>23</sup>



Xishan 西山, 1932.

Left: The inner courtyard in front of the chapel of the priory of Sts. Peter and Andrew. Photo: Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries (Saint-André), Bruges.

Below: The Benedictine priory of Sts. Peter and Andrew, seen from the south. The entrance of the monastery is clearly visible, as are the monastery properties on the hill in the background. Photo: Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint-Andries (Saint-André), Bruges.



23 Cf. Ma Wan Sang, “Le Monastère de Si shan en Chine,” in: *Bulletin des Missions* 13 (1934), supp. no. 1: *Le Courrier de l’Apostolat Monastique*, pp. 4\*-14\* (with photograph); and Théodore Nève, “Le monastère des SS. Pierre et André de Si-Shan,” in: *Bulletin des Missions* 15 (1936), supp. no. 1: *Le Courrier de l’Apostolat Monastique*, pp. 6\*-11\*.

When Jehan Joliet moved to an hermitage near Xishan in 1934 after his forced retirement as prior, his successor, Gabriel Roux (1900–1936), continuing the line of inculturation tirelessly promoted by his predecessor, was assiduously devoted to studying the Chinese language. His deep love of the culture of the country deepened his desire for a monastery that would look and feel Chinese. He made every effort to add interior decorations and furnishings that complemented the Chinese architectural style of the monastic buildings. To this end he commissioned a young sculptor to carve crosses and candelabra for the chapel in the best Chinese style from the stone of the surrounding mountains. Jehan Joliet’s insistence on giving monastic life in Xishan as much of a Chinese character as possible was now fully assimilated by the community.

*The buildings are entirely Chinese – inside and outside. At Sishan [Xishan] even the church is decorated in the Chinese style, and the Gothic vestments, designed by one of the fathers, are made in Chinese embroidery. The monks wear Chinese dress, eat Chinese meals (with chopsticks), and, with the exception of the Holy Mass and the Divine Office, chant the prayers in Chinese.*<sup>24</sup>

The formation of postulants and novices was the key to achieving the kind of “Chinese-style” monasticism envisioned by Jehan Joliet. From the time of his arrival in China, his main concern had been that the “door be wide open, from day one, to all those who *vere quaerunt Deum*.”<sup>25</sup> “If you want a Chinese monastery, [...] a Chinese novitiate is essential.”<sup>26</sup> At the end of 1927 Joliet wrote to Abbot Nève, dwelling at length on the issue.

*How are [the postulants] to be received? Sending them to Saint Andrew, it seems to me, is impracticable under the present circumstances [...] If I were to suggest to these postulants that they, or at least some of them, could go to make their novitiate in Belgium, I can see their profound dismay: “You too, you are like the others, you want to westernize us, you will not treat us as equals unless you form us in isolation outside China” [...] Suppose that this is ignored and that some will certainly come to Belgium [...] and that they return to China as excellent monks. Since the best were chosen to be sent and since they had a good formation, it is inevitable that they will be given positions of authority and will have influence, and this will confirm the others and the laypeople in their preconceptions, without calculating the division in the monastery itself [...] To accept postulants a novitiate is needed here, and only with the assurance of having a novitiate open can we deal seriously with these budding vocations [...] In sum, what we urgently demand is [for you] to press Rome for the opening of a novitiate as soon as we are established in Sze-Chwan [Sichuan], this very year.*<sup>27</sup>

24 *Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang*, cited in: David J. Endres, “The Legacy of Thaddeus Yang,” in: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34 (2010) 1, pp. 23-27, here p. 24.

25 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Gaston Aubourg, 3 July 1928, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 151. Joliet refers to the passage of the Rule of St. Benedict that asks that the candidate for monastic life be examined to determine if *revera Deum quaerit* (“he truly seeks God”: Rule of St. Benedict 58,7).

26 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Théodore Nève, 26 September 1928, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 158.

27 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Théodore Nève, 6 December 1927, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, pp. 126-127.

As has been mentioned, Rome gave permission to have a canonical novitiate on site, which was opened in 1930. However, the kind of formation that would be given in this novitiate was a further source of misunderstanding between Joliet and Abbot Nève. According to canon law, it was not possible to begin studies for priestly ordination without being *inferioribus disciplinis rite instructi*,<sup>28</sup> that is, without having a basic knowledge of Latin. It was Joliet's firm conviction, gained over the years, that it was “difficult and disastrous to impose on the Chinese a European training as an essential preparation for the priesthood.”<sup>29</sup> Even before the arrival of the first Chinese postulants, he proposed that monastic profession be separated from priestly ordination, and that those who demonstrated an aptitude for the monastic life, but were not suited for language studies and philosophy, be allowed to enter the novitiate and make monastic profession. Joliet was against the division of the community into two categories of monks, so he made a bold proposal:

*My wish always has been to have only one category of monks, period. This is completely Chinese and it avoids the danger of two castes, those of the choir (Europeans with some rare Chinese) and the other, the mass of Chinese lay-brothers [...] I am decided [...] in this sense [...] From the beginning of their postulancy they would come to the choir with us, learning the psalms by heart or reading them transcribed phonetically in Chinese.*<sup>30</sup>

The correspondence between Joliet and Nève shows how important this issue was. The attitude of the abbot of Saint Andrew was defensive, invoking canon law and Church discipline rather than demonstrating an understanding of the real situation:

*Your difficulties arise from a misunderstanding. It is not a matter of working for the glory of Saint Andrew or of Saint Peter of Solesmes rather than following your own will. Rome has made me responsible for the foundation of Si-Shan [Xishan] and not for its prior. The foundation charter foresees this. Si-Shan is a simple priory dependent in everything on its mother abbey. As a result, it has to develop according to the spirit and the letter of the constitutions of Saint Andrew unless it has special privileges.*<sup>31</sup>

In front of this opposition, Joliet decided to go his own way, no longer consulting the abbot regarding the acceptance of applications for entry into the novitiate and admission to first monastic profession. However, since he was unable to find persons able to ensure the formation of postulants and novices, all of them eventually left the monastery. Then there was the question of learning French. Joliet asked and obtained that only the most talented be required to learn it.

If Gabriel Roux, the successor of Jehan Joliet, followed his predecessor in what concerned the architectural style of the monastery, he did not do the same in what concerned the monastic formation. In this field he strictly followed the directions given by Saint

28 *Codex Iuris Canonici Pii X Pontificis Maximi*, n.p.: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis 1932, canon 589, p. 176.

29 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Théodore Nève, 9 April 1930, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 191.

30 Letter of Jehan Joliet to Gaston Aubourg, 8 October 1929, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 184.

31 Letter of Théodore Nève to Jehan Joliet, 21 February 1931, in: Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 204.

Andrew regarding the monastic education of candidates. A school for oblates was opened to provide a basic education to future monks. All the proposals made in previous years by Joliet were therefore abandoned.

The second successor of Joliet as prior of the community, Raphaël Vinciarelli (1897–1972), although urged by Joliet to pursue his ideal of “monastic life alone,” continued to implement the Saint Andrew vision of “apostolic ministry” by opening an elementary school and a dispensary for the inhabitants of the surrounding area. His ideal of adaptation to the Chinese context, if there should be any, was much more prudent than Joliet’s enthusiastic view. For Vinciarelli, the process of adaptation to Chinese ways had to be careful and gradual.

*If an adaptation is to be made, let it be made slowly, naturally, in the course of experience. But let us not say: let us change, let us adapt. The Chinese are themselves occupied in adapting to European life. They are changing many things. Let them go on and let us wait. There is one adaptation necessary, to love them and to make them feel this.<sup>32</sup>*

Absolute importance of “cooperation” and “dialogue” between the different parts and the right balance between “autonomy” and “communion” between them: the case of the Benedictine monastic undertaking at Xishan is a clear historical evidence of these needs in any process of inculturation of the Church. If there soon arose a lack of openness to dialogue between the “centre” and the “periphery,” between the impulse for innovation and the brakes of institutionalization, it cannot but be acknowledged that something was already lacking during the preliminary phase of the project. Even though it had been prepared over a long period of time by someone as insightful and committed as Jehan Joliet, his China project was unsuccessful because preparation for it was the work of a lone man who failed to engage his superiors and his community in an honest and open dialogue on its main components. As noted by one who was most familiar with the “Joliet project,” “while Dom Joliet was personally prepared to face difficulties, what was lacking was communal reflection and preparation, a gathering that would have brought together superiors and members of a planning committee to discuss and come to a joint decision about a work that could only be successful if it was communally planned and implemented.”<sup>33</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

The past history of Christian monasticism in China basically shows that the process of its development in the Chinese cultural context required a bold spiritual attitude of openness to the future and a willingness to accept the transformation of monastic forms that had been received from Western tradition. Unfortunately, because of external conditions, there were only twenty years in which to translate into projects, choices, and concrete achievements the awareness of the necessity for immediate adaptation and inculturation.

32 Letter of Raphaël Vinciarelli, 19 April 1935, in: Papeians de Morchoven, *Labbaye de Saint-André Zevenkerken*, vol. 2, p. 220.

33 Delcourt, *Dom Jehan Joliet*, p. 272.

Even the most successful undertakings remained, at best, in the experimental stage. There was no time for them to become institutionalized. The exodus from China imposed on foreign monks in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the inability of Chinese monks and nuns to live a monastic life in the subsequent years were thus the main obstacle to the development of a Chinese monasticism.

Nevertheless, realizations, tensions, experiments, and even mistakes that occurred in the past can be a reference point for the Chinese Church today and tomorrow in its process of steadily becoming a Church with both Chinese eyes and a Catholic heart. As Jehan Joliet put it, “It is precisely because we want to found a monastery that is fully *Catholic* that we wish it to be *Chinese*.”<sup>34</sup> With the sincere hope that one day, God willing it be soon, monastic communities will again bloom from the seed still hidden beneath the earth of China and contribute to this process.

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34 Cited *ibid.*, p. 209 (emphasis added).