

## RECENSÃO

# Being Catholic in Contemporary Macao

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reviews Hon-Fai Chen's latest monograph entitled *Catholics and Everyday Life in Macau: Changing Meanings of Religiosity, Morality, and Civility*, which offers an in-depth sociological investigation of the ecclesial identity of the Roman Catholic Church, its engagement with state and society, and the growing prophetic witness among the laity. Focusing on the popular imaginary of citizenship, Chen draws on qualitative data to show that faced with intense psychological conflicts without abandoning the faith, local Catholics are keen to reconcile secular humanism with contemporary Catholic social teachings. Instead of following blindly the conservative doctrines and instructions of the institutional Church, they adhere to Catholicism as a personal faith and utilize the God-ordained freedom to exercise personal agency in an increasingly materialistic society.

**KEYWORDS:** Catholicism; Religiosity; Secularization; Citizenship; Faith-based Activism; Engagement

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In *Catholics and Everyday Life in Macau*, Hon-Fai Chen of the Hong Kong Lingnan University presents an accurate, well-researched and insightful sociological investigation of the ecclesial identity of the Roman Catholic Church, its engagement with state and society, and the growing prophetic witness among the laity. Focusing on the popular imaginary of citizenship inside the Church, Chen draws on qualitative data to show that Catholics in Macao are striving to navigate the Christian sense of charity, service and civic engagement in a fast-changing environment.

Composed of six concise chapters, the introduction outlines the analytical framework for studying the endogenous and exogenous forces that have shaped the evolvement of church-state relations and the development of faith-based activism in today's Macao. In chapter one, Chen revisits the conventional understanding of secularization and secularity. He argues that faced with "intense inner conflicts without giving up the faith," local Catholics are keen to reconcile secular humanism with contemporary Catholic social teachings. Instead of following blindly the religious

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doctrines and instructions of the institutional Church, they adhere to Catholicism as a personal faith and utilize the God-ordained freedom to exercise personal agency in an increasingly materialistic society.

The changing church-state relations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is the focus of discussion in chapter two. As Catholics become more educated and cosmopolitan, they seek to move beyond traditional ritualism and assert their faith in everyday life. The consistent efforts by the Catholic educational and social institutions to build a moral community have provided the laity with an autonomous space to nurture Christian citizenship and charity. In particular, Catholic schooling infuses the vocationally-oriented educational curriculum with spiritual insights, strengthening religious actors' resolve to tackle public issues through the lens of Christian ethics.

The next chapter reviews the gradual rise of sociopolitical activism among local Catholics before and after the handover of the territory's sovereignty to China in 1999. The middle-class Chinese Catholic professionals are determined to pursue activism outside the confines of the paternalist Church (p.123). Chen refers to the same pattern of activism among Hong Kong Catholics for comparison. This conceptual discussion could have been more effective if Chen brought his sociological findings in conversation with Lida V. Nedilsky (2014)'s work on Christian activism in Hong Kong.

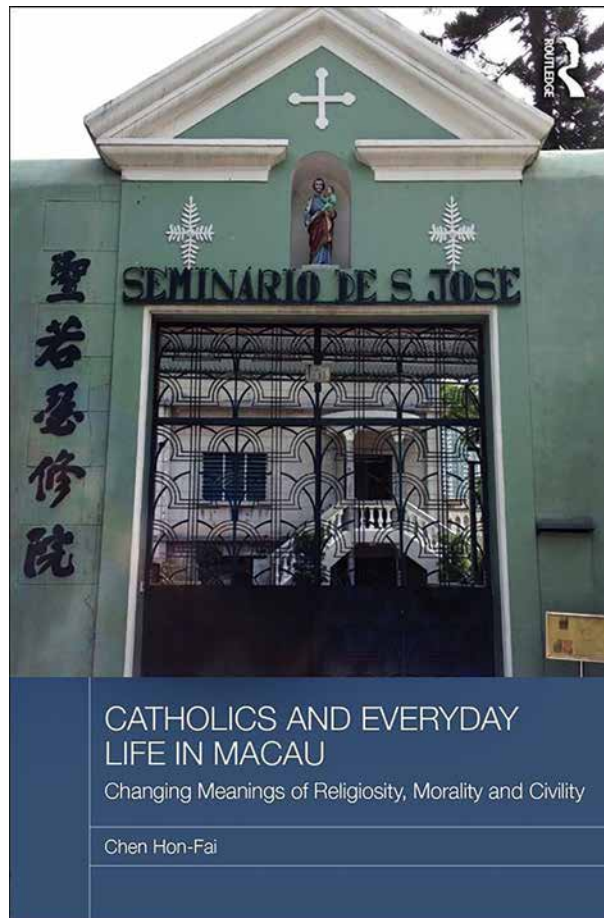
Chapter 4 discusses different modes of Catholic civic engagement. The most creative strategies included

the expansion of Catholic youth ministry, religious pilgrimage service for tourists, and adult theological programs. Offering "spiritual education in the guise of cultural heritage tours" has become an important outreach to tourists from China, Hong Kong,

Taiwan and Southeast Asia, enhancing the territory's Catholic heritage and bulwarking against the corrosive effects of casino liberalization and excessive consumerism. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the first Protestant missionary to China, Robert Morrison (1782–1834), was buried in Macao and his tomb was well-maintained by local Protestants, attracting visitors worldwide. Chen concludes the sociological analysis by emphasizing the global-local linkages in Macao Catholicism. In particular, the charming appeal of Pope Francis has renewed popular interest in Christian service and charity.

Two important lessons can be discerned from Chen's research. The first major lesson is that the best way out of Macao's governance challenge is to rebuild mutual bonds

among citizens through faith-based activism. As French thinker Alain Touraine points out, "a life devoted exclusively to consumption, to self-interest or to the rejection of other people often constitutes an obstacle" toward the embrace of universal values of justice, freedom, and equality (2014: 128). This is most relevant for a high-incomed society like Macao, where local Catholic actors could empower the civil society and enable ordinary citizens to search for an alternative mode of governance.



Hon-Fai Chen, *Catholics and Everyday Life in Macau: Changing Meanings of Religiosity, Morality, and Civility* (New York: Routledge, 2017), viii + 196 pp. ISBN: 978-0415715935. Hardcover.

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Equally important is the symbiotic relationship and faith and activism. In Macao, Roman Catholicism exercises much institutional influence and enjoys privileges disproportionate to their overall membership. Being the religion of the status quo in the Portuguese era, the teachings of the Church supported and stabilized the colonial rule. Nevertheless, the impacts of Catholicism on civic behaviors are largely determined by human interpretation and execution of the Church's social teachings. As with faith communities elsewhere, Catholics in Macao still uphold the transcendental ideas of sacred and profane, right and wrong, good and evil. They defend the tradition of church–state separation by referring to Luke 20:25: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s, and unto God the things which be Gods.” Other people may interpret Christianity as a total blueprint for life by referring to Matthew 6:24: “No one can serve two

masters. ... You cannot serve both God and money.” In fact, many informants interviewed by Chen represent “the most inspiring embodiment of the Christian virtues of self-sacrifice and of fraternal *agape*” (Rorty 1999: 207).

In short, Chen’s timely and insightful monograph reveals Macao as a postcolonial city fraught with tensions and discontents which the postcolonial elites have tried to contain and cover up through appeals to prosperity. Yet the city still faces the problem of governance, for coinciding with its steady growth through gaming industry and further integration with China is the sociopolitical awakening of its citizens, and with it, the rise of organized activism. By critiquing authoritarian rule and excessive capitalism as solutions to these crises, Catholics in Macao have taken the initiative to build community ties, consolidate civil society and create opportunities for engagement. **RC**

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