

# Christianizing the Landscape: Old Catholic Churches in China

JOSEPH TSE-HEI LEE\*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay reviews Alan Richard Sweeten's latest book, entitled *China's Old Churches: The History, Architecture, and Legacy of Catholic Sacred Structures in Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei Province*, which explains in colourful detail how urban and rural Catholics across northern China manifested their ecclesial identity through architecture and iconography. This timely and comprehensive account historicizes the images and designs of prominent Catholic churches, creating a visual overview of an immensely agitated period and region, revealing unprecedented dangers and challenges for evangelization, as well as freedom and opportunity for cross-cultural collaboration. Sweeten contextualizes the enduring process of Christianization within the actions of religious adaptation and adjustment, empire transition, and cross-cultural engagement between Western missionaries and indigenous actors.

**KEYWORDS:** Christianization; Sacred architecture; Religious heritage; *Mission Civilisatrice*.

\*Joseph Tse-Hei Lee is Professor of History and Executive Director of the Global Asia Institute at Pace University in New York City, USA. He is author of *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2003; Chinese edition, 2010), and co-author with Christie Chui-Shan Chow of *Context and Vision: Visualizing Chinese-Western Cultural Encounters in Chaoshan* 《處境與視野：潮汕中外交流的光影記憶》 (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2017). His edited works include *The Church as Safe Haven: Christian Governance in China* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2019); *Christianizing South China: Mission, Development and Identity in Modern Chaoshan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); *Hong Kong and Bollywood: Globalization of Asian Cinemas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); *China's Rise to Power: Conceptions of State Governance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and *Marginalization in China: Recasting Minority Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Professor de História e Director executivo do Instituto Global da Ásia na Universidade Pace em Nova Iorque, EUA. É autor de *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2003; edição chinesa, 2010), e co-autor com Christie Chui-Shan Chow de *Context and Vision: Visualizing Chinese-Western Cultural Encounters in Chaoshan* 《處境與視野——潮汕中外交流的光影記憶》 (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2017). Editou *The Church as Safe Haven: Christian Governance in China* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2019); *Christianizing South China: Mission, Development and Identity in Modern Chaoshan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); *Hong Kong and Bollywood: Globalization of Asian Cinemas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); *China's Rise to Power: Conceptions of State Governance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); e *Marginalization in China: Recasting Minority Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Alan Richard Sweeten should be praised for producing this well-crafted, insightful, and informative study of China's Catholic religious architecture. *China's Old Churches* is an excellent addition to the growing body of literature on the material culture of Christianity, clearly explaining how urban and rural Catholics across northern China manifested their ecclesial identity in architecture and iconography. This timely and comprehensive account historicizes the images and designs of the Catholic churches on display, creating a visual overview of an immensely agitated period and region, revealing unprecedented dangers and challenges for evangelization, as well as freedom and opportunity for cross-cultural collaboration. Sweeten contextualizes

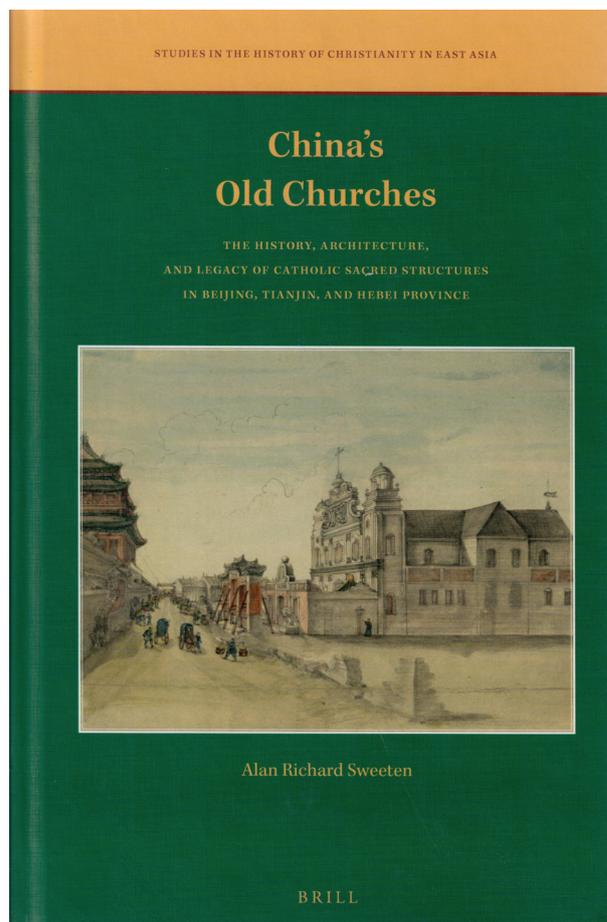
## RECENSÃO

the enduring process of Christianization within the actions of religious adaptation and adjustment, empire transition, and cross-cultural engagement between Western missionaries and indigenous actors. For anyone who has not yet visited, or cannot travel to, northern China, this book is the next best thing, as it is filled throughout with images of nicely designed churches. More importantly, Sweeten brings the story up to date by visiting these famous churches, comparing their current state with the old historical photos, interviewing local clergy, and capturing the latest development of religious affairs. He neatly integrates these colourful illustrations, maps, and old and new pictures into the narrative.

Situating this in-depth regional history of sacred architecture within the fields of Chinese Christianity, material culture, and heritage studies, Sweeten explains in great detail how missionary architecture in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei Province is closely associated with the legacy of earlier Catholic evangelization and the late-nineteenth-century French discourse of the *mission civilisatrice* (i.e. the civilizing mission to convert China to Roman Catholicism and European values and norms). Drawing on an impressive array of European and Chinese archival sources that have not been widely consulted before, he highlights the logistical challenges of building European-style churches in rural and urban areas, as well as prominent foreign missionaries' and bishops' uneasy relations with late imperial Chinese officials. He documents the systematic efforts and partnerships by Vincentian missionaries and Chinese parishioners to construct Gothic churches, assert their Catholic presence locally, and reshape the cosmological, religious, social and political landscapes of Beijing, Tianjin and rural Hebei. These churches went through their own life cycles. They survived the anti-Christian violence during the Boxer War (1899–1901), the turbulent years of warlord conflict and the Japanese military occupation, and the socialist transformation during the Maoist era (1949–1976).

Today, these church buildings have resurfaced as religious sites managed by the state-sanctioned Catholic patriotic associations. Seeing the Gothic churches as embodiments of global religion and local culture, Sweeten's empirical and analytical findings offer incredible insights for Sinologists, church historians, religious scholars and heritage specialists.

Composed of eight chapters, including an excellent introduction, the book begins by contrasting the verticality of European Gothic churches with the temporality of traditional Chinese architecture. The forms of Chinese Gothic churches reveal many fascinating insights about the country in a time of dramatic transition. Providing a spatial



Alan Richard Sweeten. *China's Old Churches: The History, Architecture, and Legacy of Catholic Sacred Structures in Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei Province* (Studies in the History of Christianity in East Asia). Leiden: Brill, 2019.

## BOOK REVIEW

context wherein foreign missionaries and Chinese worshippers met, interacted and socialized, the churches served basic architectural, religious and institutional functions for the faithful, and expressed and symbolized unique European meanings on Chinese soil.

Chapter two lays out a framework to distinguish the architectural styles of different phases of the Catholic missionary movement in China. The symbolism of the Christian cross brought together a wide range of European architectural ideas embraced by various religious orders, and connected these ideas to Chinese cosmological meanings, particularly those surrounding the worship of the Lord of Heaven (*tianzhu*). The characterization of numerous old and new Catholic buildings as hyphenated structures, both Western and Chinese simultaneously, gave rise to an in-between identity among bicultural worshipping communities, thereby challenging us to move beyond the narrow categories of empires and to look into the lived experience of European missionaries and Chinese actors who did not feel troubled by such dictates.

The next chapter surveys the historic churches in downtown Beijing, including the “original four”—South, East, North, and West Churches—constructed before the advent of Western imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century, and St. Michael’s and St. Thérèse’s churches, built in the post-Boxer era. The Catholic Establishment in Beijing was composed of multiple layers. While building churches, hospitals, orphanages, schools, seminaries and printing facilities, modern Catholic missionary expansion was fraught with tension and rivalry. Sweeten highlights the importance of religious architecture as a unique lens through which to view the pros and cons of the *mission civilisatrice*. Having taken control of the original South Church and its associated premises, the French Catholic Mission asserted its socio-political dominance in the heart of Beijing. The cosmological competition between the South Church and Beijing’s palaces and temples

still resonates in Susan Naquin’s (2000) discussion of Beijing’s evolving religious landscape and Anthony E. Clark’s (2020) study of the North Church (*Beitang*). All these renovated Catholic structures constitute an integral part of Beijing’s social, cultural and religious life. In particular, Europeans and Chinese have interacted, exchanged, challenged, and permeated each other in this hyphenated religious space under changing circumstances.

Chapter four explores the proliferation of Catholic villages outside Beijing. In particular, the Jiahoutuan Church is known to be one of several Catholic settlements that defended itself successfully against the Boxers, a source of historical pride for the faithful (Sweeten, 2019: 167). The Jiahoutuan Church and other mission stations in Beijing played an influential role as a safety and security provider in troubled times, sheltering local Catholics during the turbulent months of the Boxer War. Today, these churches in Beijing and its suburbs represent “the spiritual center of an active parish,” and offer irresistible locations for urban residents to take wedding and college graduation photographs (Sweeten, 2019: 147).

Similar arguments apply to the Catholic architecture in the treaty port of Tianjin, a topic of investigation in chapter five. The Catholic expansion into Tianjin was deeply intertwined with the history of French imperialism in China, and the larger pattern of intra-church competition between returning European missionaries and Chinese laity broke out initially over control of old mission properties. Nonetheless, the Xikai Cathedral was built as a major landmark in Tianjin, and it gained much media attention in the mid-1960s when the Red Guards draped revolutionary banners on its exterior, praising Maoism over Christ, and urging people to expose anti-revolutionary religious crimes (Sweeten, 2019: 215). Like the historic churches in central Beijing, the Xikai Cathedral lost much of its courtyard, affiliated mission schools, and nearby residential zones to

## RECENSÃO

the municipal authorities after the 1950s, and it is now surrounded by shops, restaurants, hotels, and pedestrian zones in an increasingly materialistic environment.

Chapter six revisits the well-established ecclesiastical districts in the south-western part of Hebei Province, a region known for its high concentration of Chinese Catholics, and chapter seven presents an in-depth analysis of the history and development of several fast-growing Catholic parishes in rural Zhuozhou. So much scholarly emphasis has been placed on the origins, patterns and outcomes of conflict between Catholics and non-Catholics in the grassroots of Chinese society, but little attention has been given to the level of bilateral harmonious relationships. Sweeten presents some examples of fortified Catholic mission stations that protected themselves and non-Catholic neighbours from bandits, Boxers, and outside intruders. This confirms the view of late historian of religion in China, R. G. Tiedemann:

Missionaries were not merely the spiritual guides in Christian communities but were also expected to exercise effective leadership in their respective local systems. Thus, in northern China, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, priests—regardless of congregational affiliation or nationality—were instrumental in mobilizing their flocks for protective purposes at fortified rural mission stations (Tiedemann, 2018: 274).

The example of successful Catholic self-defence south of the Great Wall constituted part of a multi-layered and complicated response to severe longstanding community resource disputes that had long predated the arrival of Christianity. The only difference lay in the Catholics' capability to access better military equipment and diplomatic resources for empowerment (Tiedemann, 2018: 275). The last chapter re-evaluates the significance of these enduring Chinese Catholic churches, and concludes that sacred architecture provides a material and symbolic stage

for religious drama of conversion, even though the Chinese conversion to Christianity has been gradual and slow.

Methodologically, the way in which Sweeten syncretizes the social, religious and architectural history of China throws light on the Jesuits' and Vincentians' deep involvement in information exchange between China, Europe and the Vatican over the last few centuries. Although the Vincentians built on earlier missionary efforts in Macao to assert European cultural influence, their architectural contributions established a permanent Catholic presence in the heart of Beijing and Tianjin, and the interior of Hebei. This investigation resonates in Jaime Lara's (2004) examination of the success of the Mendicant orders in Mexico through the lens of art and architecture. Lara argues that the Mendicant orders found numerous precedents for open chapels, atrial crosses, single-nave churches and convents in European and Mozarabic styles, and Aztec precedents in colonial raised chapels and altars. The same process of converting the Chinese landscape can be discerned in the varieties of Catholic architecture across northern China.

One historical irony is that most of the Gothic churches in China are preserved as heritage sites, and co-opted into the state-controlled Catholic patriotic associations. In the Maoist period, these buildings were demonized as the evil "Other" in the official discourse of anti-imperialism. In recent years, some churches in Zhejiang Province have been instructed to remove their crosses due to new zoning restrictions (Chow, 2016). Despite these sporadic setbacks, *China's Old Churches* clearly shows that belief and memory, communal faith and church architecture, identities and objects, are inseparable, and that Chinese Catholics believe themselves to be mediating between the sacred and the profane, the global and the local. Whenever they are given the opportunity to assert their faith in public, they are keen to express an appreciation for the divine presence in architecture. This is one of the most valuable lessons from Sweeten's research. **RC**

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