

Article

Inculturation at Home: The Belgian Catholic Project for Chinese Students (1920–1930s)

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Abstract: Initiated by Vincent Lebbe in 1920, the Belgian Catholic project for Chinese students was a harbinger of inculturation. Contrary to the impression that the Catholic Church reacted slowly to the demand of indigenisation in the early twentieth century, this article demonstrates that a project specifically designed for Chinese students had already been prepared for this purpose back in Belgium. In other words, through the fostering of intercultural understanding and personal contacts between students abroad and home communities, the Belgian Catholic project became part of the Leuven school's missiological initiative, which was meant to realise Church implantation in mission countries. In order to maximise the contacts between young Chinese intellectuals and the Belgian Catholic milieu, Lebbe and his associates strategically anchored their cause into the allocation of the Sino-Belgian Indemnity Scholarship, despite stiff competition. The Catholic efforts to encourage a sense of unity evoked sympathy in Belgian society towards China, and in time contributed to charitable support for war victims at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War. Though originally driven by evangelical purposes and ideological challenges, the spirit of inculturation gave rise to an awareness of human solidarity, a legacy worthy of a true apostolate.

Keywords: Belgian Catholic project for Chinese students; inculturation; Vincent Lebbe; missiology; Sino-Belgian Boxer Indemnity Scholarship



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1. Introduction

The early twentieth century is seen as a period of growth of the indigenised Church in China (for example Charbonnier 2007; Young 2006, pp. 450–68; Duan 2017; Z. Wang 2004; Gu 2010). Compared with the narratives of the reform efforts of the Protestants, those from the Catholic mission during this period seemed to be more passive and less connected with Chinese intellectuals, hence the smaller influences. In the Protestant scene, Daniel H. Bays regarded 1900–1927 as the “Golden Age” of missions, coining the term “Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment” to highlight a group of “well-educated, well-connected, and articulate Western and Chinese” with their associations and journal influencing the intellectual world,¹ a term which has also been noticed by Chinese scholars (Yao and Luo 2000, pp. 180–90). In the Catholic scene, attention was paid to the Belgian Lazarist (*Congrégation de la Mission*) missionary Vincent Lebbe 雷鳴遠 (1877–1940), who advocated indigenisation, and the Vatican's encouragement of this direction, overcoming the opposition of the French Protectorate (Wiest 1999, pp. 33–37; Join-Lambert et al. 2017; Young 2013). In the process, Lebbe worked closely with prominent Chinese intellectuals, such as Ying Lianzhi 英斂之 (1867–1926) and Ma Xiangbo 馬相伯 (1840–1939). Olivier Sibire stressed the trusting and direct relations maintained between Chinese intellectuals and the Holy See (Sibire 2012). Nevertheless, despite Lebbe's efforts and the papal endorsement, many Catholic missionaries were in practice reluctant to implement change (Ward 2006, p. 84; Kroeger 2013, p. 100; Bays 2012, p. 141). In addition, French opposition to protect its vested interests behind the Protectorate frustrated the joint endeavours. Robert E. Carbonneau described the period of 1919–1934 as “despite reorganization, Chinese Catholicism possessed foreign,

more than native status within the Chinese psyche. Attempts at inculturation had made limited progress.” (Carbonneau 2001, p. 521).

In sum, the study on the question of indigenisation is largely focused on the happenings taking place within China. Yet, as the Vatican endorsement implied, the promotion of an indigenised Church was not specific to China but was related to a general awareness that emerged in the Church. Hence, events outside China, including in missionary home countries, also had considerable impacts on this process. A broader examination in the geographical sense would help to re-evaluate the Church’s historical experiences. In this regard, utilising the Vincent Lebbe archives as a core source,² this research reveals the Catholic effort to facilitate inculturation³ during the interwar period in Europe, through tracing the development of the Belgian Catholic project for Chinese students initiated by Lebbe in 1920.⁴

Inculturation, as José M. de Mesa put it, entails cultural sensitivity and its rise in the Church in the early twentieth century that prepared a climate for thinking about the Church differently. This vision turned the missionary approaches away from simply modelling on the western Church. Instead, it suggests that a local Church ought to be born anew in its own culture (De Mesa 2013, pp. 225–26). To some extent, the level of inculturation more or less precipitates the growth of indigenisation. Concerning the paradigm shifts of missions in particular, Jean-Paul Wiest furthered the analysis by David Bosch (Bosch 1991) and summarised two major styles: the “frontier model” and the “messenger model.” In comparison with the “frontier model” to conquer the “uncivilised”, the “messenger model” entails that missionaries dialogue with people beyond their own frontiers, by respecting cultural and religious diversities. In essence, this approach helps to promote mutual enrichment and human solidarity, serving as the preconditions for inculturation (Wiest 1997, pp. 654–81). In conformity with the latter model, “messengers” could be prepared in their home countries, regardless of the missionary target region.

This article argues that the project heralded inculturation at home by maximising the Belgian Catholic contacts with Chinese young intellectuals as an opportunity for forming mutual understanding. *Contexts of the project* first introduce the project in its ideological and theological contexts, particularly the Leuven school’s missiological approach. Moving on to a closer look, *methods of maximising contacts* demonstrate how the project managed to mobilise Belgian society in favour of its cause, with the focus on the allocation of the Sino-Belgian Boxer Indemnity Scholarship 中比庚款獎學金. Finally, *implications beyond apostolate* provides an examination of its influences showing that the efforts to facilitate the spirit of inculturation contributed to general sympathy towards China in Belgium, as shown in the relief to China at the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945).

2. Contexts of the Project

The project for students commenced when the endeavours to promote an indigenised Church in China were obstructed; at the same time, young Chinese intellectuals played a more and more important role in questioning the *raison d’être* of religion. Away from China, Lebbe found the alternative to offset this tendency by bringing Catholics in Europe in contact with students abroad. Albeit initiated in France, it was in Belgium where the project was grounded, in tandem with the development of missiology originated in Leuven.

Lebbe returned to Europe in 1920, following the conflicts with his Lazarist superior in Tianjin and a French minister concerning the “Laoxikai Incident 老西開事件” in 1916 (Leclercq 1958, pp. 146–52; Lü and Qi 2018, pp. 1–7, 33, 218). The standpoint taken by Lebbe to protest against the forced annexation using mission as pretext led to the suppression of all his social projects.⁵ Meanwhile, an attempt to build the diplomatic Sino-Vatican relationship deployed by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Lu Zhengxiang 陸徵祥 (1871–1949) failed in 1918 (Ticozzi 2009). Formally refusing any plan for Sino-Vatican relations, the French Government declared that this action was “significantly unfriendly.” (Minister of France in Beijing 1918).

Despite sympathies from the Vatican, the situation in China was far from being on Lebbe's side. In 1919, Pope Benedict XV issued the apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* (That Momentous), which proposed an appreciation for cultural differences, a separation of the Church from political power, and the need to develop the indigenous priesthood (Benedict XV 1919). Yet due to the tense relationship with the Lazarist mission, Lebbe was sent back. In France, he was allowed to take care of Chinese students, under the charge of Jean Budes de Guébriant 光若翰 (1860–1935), the Bishop of Guangzhou, who had been appointed by the Holy See as Apostolic Visitor to investigate the China mission and travelled back to France together with him (Leclercq 1958, pp. 215–16).

The contemporary ideological movements prompted this “project for Chinese students in Europe (*œuvres d'étudiants chinois en Europe*).” The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the fervent Diligent Work-Study Movement to France 留法勤工儉學運動 attracting a considerable number of young Chinese, who favoured the secularised ideology. In the eyes of the students going to France, the 1905 law on the separation of Church and state made this country an egalitarian and secular model, free from religious interference (Chen 1996, p. 63). These students consolidated their view of religion when they came in contact with anti-clerical ideology in France and further took the lead to discuss the role and nature of religion in China, contributing intellectual resources to the Anti-Christian Movement 非基督教運動 in 1922, a topic studied by Zhu Haiyan, another contributor to this special issue (Lutz 1988, pp. 33–38).

Realising the prominent role of young intellectuals in influencing the Chinese public, Lebbe sensed the threat in this tendency to the faith and felt it necessary to draw the Catholic attention to Chinese students abroad (Lebbe 1925, p. 20). Beginning in Paris where work-study students gathered, Lebbe noticed their difficulties coordinating work and studies (Soetens 2003, p. 496). As an approach to access these students, he set up French-language classes and looked for placements for them through his connections (Lebbe 1920b). Though the number of students joining him gradually increased in two years, in his letters to Bishop de Guébriant, Lebbe felt that this project found little support from his superiors (Lebbe 1920a). Affiliated with the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (*Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*), the Bishop could offer limited help (Leclercq 1958, p. 236). He suggested to Lebbe to constitute a group of people interested in and capable of continuing his good initiatives effectively (Lebbe 1920a).

In contrast with the lukewarm responses in France, his home country Belgium welcomed this project and gradually became its headquarters. The approval from Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851–1926), Archbishop of Mechelen and Primate of Belgium, was crucial. After his personal encouragement in 1921 (Mercier 1921), the Cardinal gave this project official acknowledgement: he permitted the printing of the journal *Bulletin de la Jeunesse catholique chinoise* (Bulletin of the Chinese Catholic Youth) in 1922 (Lebbe 1922), and authorised the preaching in the Brussels parish in 1923 (Mercier 1923). In 1924, he confirmed forty Chinese students at Averbode Abbey during Easter (Storck 1924), and approved Lebbe as the chaplain of the Chinese student's organisation, Catholic Association of Chinese Youth (*Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Sinica*) (Mercier 1924).

With the constant affirmation of the Cardinal, Lebbe managed to enlist a group of devoted associates in Belgium. After his visit to Verviers, its vicar André Boland (1891–1955) enrolled in the project from 1922. Having had been in contact with Théodore Nève (1879–1963) since 1913, Abbot of the Saint Andrews Abbey (*Abbaye de Saint-André* or *Sint-Andriesabdij*) near Bruges, Lebbe was invited by Nève to give a talk to the monks in 1921 and the abbey began to welcome Chinese students (Soetens 2003, p. 498). In 1926, Lebbe obtained a building in Leuven for the purpose of establishing a “Home” for Chinese students—a centre for social events, talks, religious events and administration (Boland 1928). Before the ordination of six Chinese Bishops at the St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican in October, Nève agreed to take up the responsibilities for continuing the projects for China in his correspondence with Lebbe (Theodore 1926). The latter would return to China in the following year, at the request of new Chinese Bishops.

On 28 January 1927, the non-profit association “Chinese Catholic Foyer” (*Foyer Catholique Chinois*, F.C.C.) was established at the abbey to manage the student association, the centre in Leuven, as well as student loans (see Section 3; [Rapport à l’Assemblée Générale 1929](#)). In October, Lu Zhengxiang, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, entered the abbey to become a Benedictine, who served as vice president of the F.C.C. In August 1930, Boland founded a new association, Society of Auxiliaries of the Missions (*Société des Auxiliaires des Missions*, S.A.M.) in Leuven ([Gillet 2012](#), p. 123). By the decision of Willem van Rossum (1854–1932), Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*), the project for China was handed over to the S.A.M, with the headquarters shifted from Bruges to Leuven ([Boland 1930b](#)). Boland said that in 1930 an adequate number of Belgian priests had joined the project ([Boland 1930a](#)).

Thus far, the keen support evoked in Belgium consolidated the Catholic projects for Chinese students. Clues to make sense of the enthusiasm could be spotted in the objectives of the F.C.C. and the S.A.M. The former states that its main purpose was “the creation of Chinese university centers and seminaries, in all Belgium, and more particularly in Leuven, and the general philosophical and theological training of auxiliaries for the indigenous missions in China.” ([Rapport à l’Assemblée Générale 1929](#)) The latter held the dual purposes: “at the service of the indigenous bishops and to look after students from the mission countries, particularly from China, both in Belgium and abroad.” ([Banyangira-Rusagara 2020](#)) As the successor of Lebbe, the tasks of Boland were twofold, “continuing the apostolate among Chinese students and preparing priests to one day serve the new Chinese bishops.” ([Gillet 2012](#), p. 108) The juxtaposition indicates that the project for students in Belgium was viewed as part of the preparation for the indigenous Church in China.

The discussion of indigenisation has accounted for an important place in missiology.⁶ In fact, the main impetus behind the development of the student project also spearheaded the formation of missiology as a discipline in Belgium. Though Joseph Schmidlin (1876–1944), appointed as the first chair of Catholic missiology at Münster University in 1914, was considered the “father” of this discipline ([Üffing 2013](#), p.35), the German school focused on mission history and statistics, leaving the connection with colonialism almost entirely unquestioned. The Leuven school, instead, directly addressed the missionary issues from the field, with the main aim being church plantation ([Vandenbergh 2015](#), pp. 169, 157). As an embryonic form, the summer course “*Semaines d’ethnologie religieuse*” (Catholic Week of Religious Ethnology) was authorised by Cardinal Mercier in 1912; the goal was both to study the missionaries’ observations from the field and to provide the missionaries with ethnological knowledge to defend the religion ([Courtois 2015](#), pp. 24, 26, 17, 35). As early as in November 1913, Lebbe was invited by the Cardinal to give a lecture at the Higher Institute of Philosophy in Leuven on China and the China Mission ([Levaux 1948](#), p.166).

Stated in 1923 by Albert Lallemand and carried out by the renowned missiologist Pierre Charles (1883–1954), the “*Semaine de missiologie*” (Missiological Week) at the Leuven University scheduled Lebbe several times as a speaker, and invited Abbot Nève to become a member of the organisational committee. In addition, Lebbe was admitted to the permanent bureau. At a speech in 1925, he called for sympathetic and just treatment from the Church towards China, so as not to be the enemy of Chinese students abroad ([Soetens 2003](#), p. 497). During the Missiological Weeks, missionaries gathered to exchange experiences, common obstacles and practical news. Charles’s initiatives had an enormous success within Belgian missionary circles.⁷

Through the journal of the Saint Andrews Abbey, *Bulletin des Missions* (Bulletin of Missions), the abbey stimulated the discussions of the danger of mixing mission with colonialism, the lack of a native clergy, the importance of social action, and the need for cultural respect ([Vandenbergh 2015](#), pp. 158–59). The editor in charge, Edouard Neut (1890–1975), was a keen supporter of Lebbe. In 1923, the journal circulated his memoir addressed to the Propaganda Fide in 1918 on the state of evangelisation in China. In 1925, his Leuven speech

was reported in detail, together with those of other speakers on the topic of an indigenous Church (Papeians De Morchoven 2002, p. 165; Neut 1925, pp. 329–37).

In the burgeoning Belgian missiological context, the project for Chinese students was a component of indigenisation, an occasion to cultivate understandings via contacts. This connection could be seen in the foundation of the “Association for Interracial Appreciation and Collaboration” (*Association Universitaire Catholique d’Aide aux Missions*, A.U.C.A.M.) by Charles in 1925. In order to develop an interest in mission and in global populations at the university, Charles invited the academics to break down their own barriers, by trying to build bridges of understanding between themselves and the academic circles of the mission’s target countries. Personal contact was the very beginning of all, which could be easily achieved in Leuven between students of different nationalities. A case in point was the “Home” for Chinese students founded by Lebbe (Van Lierde 1948, pp. 711–12).

In 1946, François Legrand (1903–1984) reiterated the opportunities of cultural enrichment offered by students abroad: “A trip to Europe or America by Chinese intellectuals is an excellent opportunity to bring them into contact with Catholic circles and activities in the countries they are visiting [...] this cannot fail to have a fortunate influence and to initiate very useful cultural relations between China and Catholic countries.”⁸ The project for Chinese students in Belgium was referred to as “A lot of good has been done by the organisations that look after Chinese students abroad [...] It is worth recalling the good work done by Father Lebbe for Chinese students in France and Belgium.” (Legrand 1947, p. 62).

As Charles and Legrand championed, step by step personal contacts with intellectuals from mission countries would be helpful to prepare for inculturation, and eventually Church implantation. This ideal, however, required practical strategies to first attract public attention in Belgium. Lebbe, Boland and associates steered society towards this direction through flexible dissemination into existing Sino-Belgian enterprises.

3. Methods of Maximising Contacts

From a theological aspect, the project needed to mobilise the public to maximise the chances of personal contacts. From a financial aspect, the project demanded continuous funding to be sustained and develop. To fulfil the two necessities, one of the outreaches began with the Belgian business circle before shifting to a more stable source, the Sino-Belgian Boxer Indemnity.

In 1923, Boland founded the organisation “Belgian-Chinese Friendship” (*Amitiés Belgo-Chinoises*, A.B.C.) in Verviers, with the consent of Cardinal Mercier as its honorary president in 1924 (Boland n.d.). The A.B.C. was not exclusively ecclesiastical but aimed to solve the difficulties of the Chinese students by finding sponsors among businessmen. For the Chinese students in Belgium, it offered to provide student loans and training, as well as help with work placements and housing (Boland 1923). It informed Belgian industrialists of the economic potential of China by echoing the ambitions of King Leopold II,⁹ namely that “our future is in China.” It argued that Belgium would be in a competitive position to benefit from Chinese economic growth if the students returned with a favourable impression of the country. Thus, the role of the A.B.C. was to facilitate Belgian businessmen’s contacts with students and call for their support (Boland n.d.).

Most of the early funds came from bankers and industrialists. First, A. Simonis from 1923, then the industrialists Georges Laloux and Hubert Duquenne from 1925, members of the board of directors of the *Crédit Général Liégeois*, and finally, the businessman Paul Staes. The A.B.C. branch in Ghent received support from the industrialist Joseph de Hemptinne (Soetens 2003, p. 498). Despite such sources of income, the financial situation remained unstable and became, around 1925, “dreadful” and “catastrophic.” (Boland 1924; Boland 1925b) From 1923, in order to provide student loans, the A.B.C. borrowed from the *Banque Belge pour l’Étranger* (Belgian Foreign Bank) under the guarantee of Simonis, which the students promised to repay within ten years (Boland 1925a). But in December 1924, the bank decided to cease the loans from the following year (*Banque Belge pour l’Étranger*

1924). The number of students requesting money increased from thirty-nine in 1923 to sixty-four in 1926 (Lebbe 1923; Boland 1926). Although the Propaganda Fide arranged to donate an annual fifty thousand francs during 1926–1928, there still remained a deficit of over 100,000 francs that needed to be found in the three years (Boland 1926).

Meanwhile, chances of seeking funds from the Sino-Belgian Boxer Indemnity emerged, which was soon noticed by Lebbe and his associates. If its allocation could help to accommodate Chinese students in Belgian Catholic institutions, it would both facilitate the project and ameliorate the financial problem. Not without competitors and opponents, they succeeded in directing the funding committee to support its cause.

After the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, China signed the Boxer Protocol to pay indemnities amounting to 450 million taels of fine silver to fourteen countries, over a course of thirty-nine years with a 4% interest charge (Xinchou Tiaoyue 1901). Belgium over-claimed by about 50% in relation to the actual damages (S. Wang 2011, pp. 40–41). Another country making exaggerated demands for the indemnity was the United States, who were the first to return the amount in 1908, on the condition that the fund be used as scholarships for Chinese students to study in the United States. Belgium followed suit. In September 1925, the Belgian Minister in Beijing and the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs agreed on the principles of managing the indemnity, but the following discussion was intermitted for four years due to the Northern Expedition 北伐戰爭 (Zhongbi Gengkuan Wei yuanhui Mishuchu 1935d, p. 1). According to the document signed by the two ministers, the money was to be remitted to a Sino-Belgian Commission allocating funds to projects including education and philanthropy (Ministers of Foreign Affairs 1925).

In 1926, Lebbe's brother Robert noticed the news of the Boxer Indemnity and suggested he take action so that the money would not be monopolised by the anti-clericalists (Sohier 1984, p. 161). Before the official agreement took place, non-governmental arrangements had been made among the anti-clerical circle. As early as in 1920, Chu Minyi 褚民誼 (1884–1946), member of the Sino-French Education Association 華法教育會, anarchist Paul Gille (1865–1950), and Jules Hiernaux (1881–1944), director of the Charleroi Labour University (*l'Université du Travail de Charleroi*) 沙勒羅瓦勞動大學 began to urge the remittance. Chinese students at Charleroi also voiced the demand. Around 1922–1923, a Chinese diplomat, Belgian politicians and educationists, including Wang Jingqi 王景岐 (1882–1941), Chinese envoy plenipotentiary to Belgium, Jules Destrée (1863–1936), socialist politician, Gille Hiernaux, among others, gathered to discuss the issue concerning the indemnity (La Dette des Boxers et Nos Amis Chinois n.d.). At this point, the money was likely to subsidise the Sino-Belgian Institute 中比大學 or 曉露槐工業專修館 affiliated to the Charleroi Labour University founded in 1924, where many work-study students from France had transferred to, including the future Chinese Communist General Nie Rongzhen 聶榮臻 (1899–1992) (Pan 2012).

When the interrupted Sino-Belgian Commission of Education and Philanthropy 中比庚款委員會 (*Commission Sino-Belge d'Instruction et de Philanthropie*) resumed in May 1929, regular meetings consisting of Chinese and Belgian representatives were held from June to August to specify the allocation of the indemnity. Concerning Chinese students in Belgium, the commission decided that 12% of the total amount would be used on academic affairs (S. Wang 2011, pp. 544–46). From 1929 to 1933, this amount was converted to fifty-four full scholarships of fifteen thousand francs a year each and twenty half scholarships worth seven thousand francs (Zhongbi Gengkuan Wei yuanhui Mishuchu 1935d, p. 1). While Chu Minyi chaired the commission¹⁰ and Charleroi were given nine scholarships in 1929,¹¹ Soetens found it surprising that the number of students entering the Labour University dropped compared to prior to their availability. Judging from the overall statistics from 1929 to 1939, of the 309 grants awarded, Leuven was in the lead with 69 (Soetens 2003, pp. 495, 505).

The aforementioned might partly be explained by Lebbe and Boland's influence on the commission, starting with the letter from Robert on the indemnity. In 1927, Boland was approached by the businessman Maurice Pieters who initiated the "Sino-Belgian Inter-

university Committee" (*Comité interuniversitaire sino-belge*, C.I.S.B.) 中比大學聯合會, consisting of rectors, bankers, an executive committee and a consultative committee formed of Chinese students (*Comité Interuniversitaire Sino-Belge* 1927). Pieters as the secretary invited Boland to join as a member of its executive committee one week after the foundation (*Pieters* 1927; *Comité Sino-Belge* 1927). In 1928, the C.I.S.B. applied to the Sino-Belgian Commission to be its delegate in Belgium (*Luo* 1929a). At that time, the "Reclaim Education Rights Movement 收回教育權運動" had been underway in China since 1924. The Anti-Christian Movement turned its target to mission-run schools and universities, for fear that foreign education would obliterate the students' sense of Chinese nationhood. Student and educational societies demanded that the Bureau of Education outlaw educational institutions owned by foreigners, which became part of the anti-imperialist movement across the Republic of China (*Waldron* 1995, pp. 158–59). The Nationalist Government ordered in 1926 that foreign schools were to be registered with the Ministry of Education and accept its instruction and supervision (*Lutz* 1971, pp. 215–55; Y. *Wang* 2015). Given this context, the Chinese Embassy in Belgium sent back confidential reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 17 June 1929, opposing the appointment of the C.I.S.B. on the grounds that granting access to a foreign organisation with unclear intentions would violate the right to a national education. Inevitably, students had started to protest outside the Belgian embassy (*Luo* 1929b).

From 17 to 27 June, the Sino-Belgian Commission held five meetings without finalising the criteria and the executives of the scholarship. On the 27th, one of the Belgian representatives, Joseph Hers (1884–1965), suggested to take a pause for the commission to do detailed research on all the proposals and applications (*Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu* 1935b, pp. 3–22).

Hers was sent to China in 1905 as a consular agent to learn the Chinese language and act as an interpreter for the Belgian legislation and consulates, before participating in the business coordination of the Belgium-invested railways, including the Lanzhou-Lianyungang line 隴海鐵路 and the Kaifeng-Luoyang line 汴洛鐵路. Spending decades in China, he forged strong links with his compatriots sojourned there, but he also sympathised with the local people and deplored discrimination (*Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer* 2015). As a foreign corresponding member of the C.I.S.B. from 1927 (*Comité Sino-Belge* 1927), Hers was in charge jointly with Chu of academic affairs (*Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu* 1935a, pp. 31, 36, 40–41, 45), whilst judging by the study abroad guidebook published in 1934, Hers seemed to play the decisive role. The book suggested that prospective students consult Hers, and after arrival approach Pieters of the C.I.S.B. in case of any settling-in problems (*Haiwai Liuxue Zixun Weiyuanhui* 1934, pp. 15, 23). Chu was absent from the recommended contacts.

On 8 July, Lebbe sent an urgent letter from China to his associates in Belgium, asking for supportive evidence for obtaining the indemnity "as quickly as possible" (in capital letters) to Mr. Hers, who was a former "Leuvenist", a member of the commission and "very devoted to our cause." He concluded with an appeal for urgency: "Quick! A delay can compromise everything." (*Lebbe* 1929) On the 25th, Hers sent a telegraph to Boland, asking him to reveal the total number of Chinese students enrolled in Leuven last year (*Hers* 1929).

Four days later, on the 29th, the commission meeting restarted, during which the rules to subsidise students and the quota attributed to each educational institution were fixed. In addition, despite opposition, the C.I.S.B. was chosen as the sole delegate, to gather information and send requests to China, and to carry out the decisions by the commission in Belgium (*Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu* 1935b, pp. 22–30). Its official status was "under the high patronage of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and Sciences and Arts of Belgium, and Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Education of China." Objections did not vanish thereafter. In July 1930, the "Sino-Belgian League in Belgium" (*La Ligue Sino-Belge en Belgique*) circulated a manifesto against Chu and Pieters, accusing them of colluding in order to monopolise the Boxer Indemnity for their own interests, by creating

the C.I.S.B. as a smoke screen and urging Belgian academics to discredit the organisation (*La Ligue Sino-Belge en Belgique* 1930). Nonetheless, the C.I.S.B. carried on. The annual reports for the years 1931–1933 stated that the commission was generally satisfied with it (*Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu* 1935a, pp. 14, 36, 41, 45).

In principle, the C.I.S.B. had only executive duties, while the decision to grant scholarships was solely made by the commission, based on the students' performance in exams (*Soetens* 2003, p. 505). Yet the correspondence of Boland suggests that he could effectively influence the commission through Hers. In a letter written in October 1930, concerning a scholarship recommendation for the student Gu Yiqing 顧益卿 (Pierre Ku I King), Boland wrote: "As I have a certain influence over Mr Hers, I hope that it is still possible—given the late hour—that our friend will succeed." (*Boland* 1930c) According to the "Table of Sino-Belgian Box Indemnity Scholars 中比庚款委員會留比學生人名學歷表", Gu was awarded the full scholarship for his studies in commerce at the University of Liège during 1930–1931 (*Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu* 1935c, p. 17). Having finished his studies in 1932, Gu went to Shanghai and worked as the secretary for the well-known lay Catholic industrialist Lu Bohong 陸伯鴻 (1875–1937) (*Zhongbi Youyi Hui* 1933, p. 23).

In July 1931, Boland wrote to Hers saying that Pieters had leaked to him Hers's plan to promote certain fields of studies, which he applauded. One of his suggestions was to discourage the study of politics and social sciences given that it was easier to achieve high marks in this course, thus depriving students engaged in "more serious and difficult" studies of the opportunity to obtain funds (*Boland* 1931). Hers replied that from the following year, scholarships would no longer be awarded to students in the social, economic, political, colonial and diplomatic sciences (*Hers* 1931). The decision was officially announced in May 1932 to Chinese students in Belgium (*Comité Interuniversitaire Sino-Belge* 1932).

Up to this point, the Catholic project for Chinese students successfully embedded itself into official Sino-Belgian undertakings, creating the groundwork for Catholic contacts with young Chinese intellectuals. For example, links were established between students and the Belgian families who welcomed them, including the Heureux and Braun families in Brussels, Lejeune and Gheur in Verviers, Levaux in Liège and de Brouwer in Ghent (*Soetens* 2003, p. 500). The underlying spirit to conduct intercultural contacts was "Christian universalism", which missiologist Charles characterised as envisaging "the community of all men, and their unity in the mystical body of Christ." (*Van Lierde* 1948, pp. 711–12) As a result, the mentality of a fundamental human unity generated a sense of sympathy in Belgian society towards China, not limited to apostolic outcomes.

4. Implications beyond Apostolate

In the overview of the work done in Belgium from 1922 to 1929, Boland summarised that one of the main results was the sympathy towards China through publicity. On the one hand, to eliminate misconceptions about China in Belgian opinion; on the other, to introduce the real China with its history, traditions, and moral strengths. The methods employed were over two thousand lectures defending Chinese points of view, Chinese arts displays, monthly bulletins (for five years, distributed in thirty-nine countries) as well as newspaper articles. He said: "We dare to claim that China has never had such publicists." (*Boland* 1929).

These aforementioned efforts yielded ripple effects. For instance, it drew Lu Zhengxiang to the St. Andrews Abbey, and thanks to his reputation and personal networks, Sino-Belgian Catholic connections were further enhanced. In 1932, after he had made his final vows, Lu drafted a letter to the chargé d'affaires to Belgium, possibly Luo Huai 羅懷,¹² expressing gratitude for his attendance, and enclosing the journal of the abbey, the *Bulletin des Missions*. He emphasised, inter alia, that journal editor Neut had promoted justice for China over twenty years, demanded the abolition of extraterritoriality, a ban on opium trade and the equal treatment of Chinese clergy. The strong compassion embodied in the journal was a major reason for him to join the abbey in 1927. He hoped that the diplomat would make a one-year subscription to the journal as a gesture of encouragement to

Neut, which would also draw more attention from the abbey towards China in the future (Lu 1932).

The contacts established and the sympathies aroused in Belgium resulted in expressions of humanitarian support towards China, especially at the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) before Belgium had been impacted by the later European warfare. Members affiliated to the project more or less contributed to charitable and relief programs.

In December 1938, as public opinion in Europe was influenced by pro-Japan propaganda, Yu Bin 于斌 (1901–1978), Bishop of Nanjing, asked Lu and Neut to launch a periodical in Belgium to defend the Chinese cause against invasion and to counterbalance Japan. *Le Correspondant Chinois* (The Chinese Correspondent) thus came into existence in February 1939. It inherited Lebbe's approach: Neut oriented the journal as "a publication launched in Belgium by a group of Belgians and Chinese, claiming to be part of the movement that, several years earlier, Lebbe had founded in Belgium—spreading the truth about China, its national renewal and Japan's attitude towards China and the Far East as a whole." (Neut 1942).

More tangible aid came from the wartime hospitals in Shanghai. On 19 December 1937, the Belgian Committee for Relief for the Victims of the War in China (*Le Comité belge de secours aux victimes de la guerre en Chine*) was set up in Brussels to help the victims under the patronage of the Red Cross. The members included delegates from business, as well as missionary and charitable groups, among which Franz Thys was the president of the C.I.S.B, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Members of the Belgian Committee for Relief for the Victims of the War in China.

Position	Name	Title
Chairman	Mr. Galopin	Governor of the <i>Société Générale</i>
Vice-Chairman	Professor Nolf	Chairman of the Belgian Red Cross
	Mr. Heymans	Chairman of the <i>Krediet Bank</i>
	Mr. Orts	Minister Plenipotentiary
Secretary General	Mr. Dronsart	Director General of the Belgian Red Cross
	Mr. Disière	Consul General of Belgium
Treasurer	Mr. Straetmans	Managing Director of the <i>Banque Belge pour l'Étranger</i>
Member	R.P. Joseph Rutten	Superior General of C.I.C.M. (<i>Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae</i>)
	R.P. Verhaegen	Vice Superior General of C.I.C.M.
	Mr. A. François	
	Mr. Henri Rolin	
	General Pontus	
	Mr. Callens	
	Mr. Lambert Jadot	
	Mr. Marchal	
	Mr. Franz Thys	President of the C.I.S.B.
	Mr. Goldschmidt	
	Mr. Berger	
	Mr. Cornez	

The relief programmes comprised three components: a Sino-Belgian hospital, support for maternal assistance and food aid for the civilian population. The first batch of two hun-

dred thousand francs telegraphed to Shanghai were followed by the surgical equipment for the Sino-Belgian hospital dispatched by the Belgian Red Cross. The committee published in Belgian newspapers asking for donations: “in the name of international solidarity, in the name of compassionate humanity, we appeal to your generosity to relieve the innocent victims of the war in China.” ([Association Amicale Sino-Belge 1937](#)) The funds and supplies were managed by the Belgian Relief Committee set up in Shanghai. Its members included Joseph Hers as vice-president.¹³

In February 1938, with the subsidy of 6000 dollars from the executive committee, a new hospital named Cihui 慈惠 (Tze Huei) was set up in Xujiahui 徐家匯 (Zikawei) for the refugees in the area, following the Ci'an (Tze An) Maternity Hospital 慈安產科醫院 in Nanshi 南市 (Nantao) ([Association Amicale Sino-Belge 1938a](#)). According to its first report, up until June, it was the only one equipped for surgery in Xujiahui (operations totalled 393), and before the work was taken over by the French authorities, a total of 14,852 anti-cholera and anti-typhoid inoculations of refugees were administered by the hospital to prevent epidemics. On average, there were 123 visits to the hospital a day. The expenses borne by the Belgian Relief Committee amounted to \$13,578.92 dollars ([Tze Huei Hospital 1938](#)).

For at least two winters in 1937 and 1938, a Mrs. van Cutsem gathered Belgian ladies in Shanghai to make layettes to be distributed free of charge by the Cihui Hospital and Ci'an Maternity Hospital. To the later institution, Dr. Tan Qinglan 譚慶瀾 (Jean-Marie Tan Kin Lan, 1897–1962) rendered much help before leaving for Peiping Central Hospital 北平中央醫院 in November 1938 ([Association Amicale Sino-Belge 1938b](#)). Tan had studied at the medical school in Leuven (1923–1932) with expertise in surgery and gynaecology by means of the Sino-Belgian Boxer Indemnity Scholarship. He was a member of the Catholic Association of Chinese Youth and present at one of its events in Leuven in 1926 (Q. Wang 2011, p. 270; [Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu 1935c](#), p. 20; Tan 1926).

When the Belgian Relief Committee appealed to society for help, it instrumentalised the pitiful memory of 1914, when Belgians had to flee along the roads of Flanders and Wallonia, juxtaposed to the gratitude felt for any outside help during those terrible years ([Association Amicale Sino-Belge 1937](#)), evoking sympathy by showing that human experiences resonated. The Catholic project was present, albeit more to express humanitarian concerns rather than for the sake of its apostolate.

5. Conclusions

Driven by evangelical purposes and ideological challenges in the 1920s, Lebbe launched the project for Chinese students in Europe as an alternative to the frustrated indigenisation endeavours in China. The general idea was to prepare the necessary conditions before setting off for the mission. In the case of contacting Chinese students abroad, it was an opportunity for the Catholics to cultivate intercultural understandings, which the Leuven school missiology affirmed. Identifying with this end, Belgium became the headquarters of the project. Further grounds to amplify the chances of contacts were created when Lebbe and Boland gained the upper hand in influencing the allocation of the Sino-Belgian Boxer Indemnity Scholarship. The theory and the practice of facilitating inculturation with a spirit of unity generated sympathy and humanitarian aid from Belgium to China during the war years.

The detailed study of the Belgian Catholic Project for Chinese Students intends to discover the question of inculturation of the Catholic Church in a broader perspective and serves as a case of alternatives to the current historical narrative of the Catholic Church in China. By widening the geographical scope, it shows that during the 1920s and 1930s, though to some extent hindered in China, the indigenised Catholic Church was being prepared within the wider missiological currents for missionary implantation. Moreover, it reveals that cultural sensitivities, dialogues and humanitarian spirits could be cultivated despite diversities and distances.

It needs to be added that Catholics were not the only people promoting a sense of universalism. Paradoxically, though there was ideological competition between the Catholics

and the socialists, they ended up contributing to the same result from different angles. Concerning the Sino-Japanese war, the socialists were the earliest to speak in defence of China against injustice. Émile Vandervelde (1866–1938), president of the Belgian Labor Party and former president of the Second International, is a valid example (Vandervelde 1931). This commonality across discrepancies suggests that a shared pursuit could be found beyond polemics. In a way, it also implies that the spirit of inculturation was not confined to apostolic purpose but could also have practical applications.

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Notes

- ¹ This establishment included people such as John Mott (1865–1955), Cheng Jingyi 誠靜怡 (1881–1939), Liu Tingfang 劉廷芳 (1891–1947), Zhao Zichen 趙紫宸 (1888–1979) and Wu Leichuan 吳雷川 (1870–1944). It had associations including the China Continuation Committee, the National Christian Council of China, Shengming-she 生命社 (Life Fellowship) as well as the journal *Shengming* 生命 (Life Journal). For reform-minded Protestants in favour of indigenisation of the church in China see Bays (2012, pp. 99–104).
- ² The Vincent Lebbe archives are stored in the French-speaking Catholic University of Leuven (*Université catholique de Louvain*, U.C.L) in Louvain-la-Neuve, see Guelluy (1981, pp. 401–3). On the site of the historical university (1834–1968) is the Flemish-speaking *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (K.U.L.). This article will use “Catholic University of Leuven” to refer to the historical university in Leuven.
- ³ “The term *enculturation* is supposed to have crossed over from the field of cultural anthropology to missiology through the work of Pierre Charles, but *inculturation* appeared for the first time in the work of Joseph Masson, S.J., in 1962, when he coined the phrase *Catholicisme Inculturé*, or ‘inculturation Catholicism’.” (Panganiban 2004, p. 61) Acknowledging that the subject in question took place before the existence of this term, this study uses “inculturation” to refer to the series of practices, such as contacts and dialogues, which led to the later theorisation.
- ⁴ Research of this project appeared as part of the history of study abroad in Belgium, see Q. Wang (2011); Soetens (2003, pp. 487–505); Pan (2012); Chen (2009).
- ⁵ Including the newspaper *Yishi Bao* 益世報 (Social Welfare) and the Catholic Action Union 公教進行會, see Levaux (1948, pp. 188, 176, 192).
- ⁶ Missiology, or mission studies, is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry into Christian mission or missions that utilises theological, historical and various social scientific methods. Scholarship in the field was recently reinvigorated by the 2010 centenary of the World Missionary Conference (Edinburgh 1910) and also by new mission statements in this century by global Christian bodies, see Kim and Fitchett-Climenhaga (2022, p. 3).
- ⁷ But they caused a storm of protest among French missionaries who felt attacked by Charles’s reproach that the French missionary movement was too interwoven with French nationalistic motives and was not doing enough to prepare a full indigenous clergy, see Vandenberghe (2015, pp. 163, 169).
- ⁸ Legrand (1947, p. 62) The book was reprinted from *Dossiers de la Commission Synodale* (1945–1946) (Digest of the Synodal Commission). In 1947, it was translated by Jing Ming 景明 into Chinese, *Wenhua Fangmian de Chuanjiao Gongzuo* 文化方面的傳教工作, published by *Duosheng Yuekan She* 鐸聲月刊社 (Vox Cleri) in Beijing.
- ⁹ Leopold II visited China when he was Duke of Brabant in the 1860s. He had great ambitions concerning China, see Vande Walle (2003).
- ¹⁰ The Chinese representatives were Chu Minyi, Zeng Zongjian 曾宗鑑, Li Zhaohuan 黎照寰, Zhu Shiquan 朱世全, Cai Hong 蔡鴻 and Kong Lixing 孔力行, while their Belgian counterparts were Joseph Hers, H. Lambert, Wygerde, Lafontaine and Hubert, see Chen (2012).
- ¹¹ The distribution was: Université Catholique de Louvain (16), Université Libre de Bruxelles (5), Université de l’État à Liège (5), Université de l’État à Gand (5), Université du Travail à Charleroi (9), École des Arts et Métiers Pierrard-Virton (4) and other institutions (10), see Zhongbi Gengkuan Weiyuanhui Mishuchu (1935c, p. 3).

- ¹² There were two chargé d'affaires at the embassy in 1932, the other one being Xie Shoukang 謝壽康 (1897–1974). Based on the letter from Luo Huai, he attended the event (Luo 1931).
- ¹³ J. Lafontaine (Chairman), Joseph Hers and A. Loonis (vice-presidents), M. Michaux (secretary), A. Lampo (treasurer).

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