
Catholic Higher Education from the Lens of Chinese Graduate Students of the College of Education of St. Paul University Manila

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Abstract: This study explores the perception and understanding of Catholic education among Chinese graduate students in the College of Education at St. Paul University Manila, Philippines. Against the backdrop of the Chinese government's increased scrutiny of religious practices and the growing trend of Chinese students pursuing international education in the Philippines, the research delves into the influence of Catholic Paulinian education on individuals who are neither Christian nor religious. The methodology involved an online open-ended survey administered to 29 Chinese graduate students, focusing on their comprehension of Catholic education as a result of their enrollment at St. Paul University Manila. The analysis employed a deductive thematic approach guided by the four dimensions of Catholic identity and three dimensions of culture. The results reveal that Chinese graduate students predominantly associate Catholic education with mentifacts, encompassing knowledge of Catholic doctrine, core values, and teachings, particularly in religious education classes. They highlight the importance of faith, hope, love, truth, justice, and peace, as well as the moral principles of the Catholic Church. These ideas are instilled by mentors with religious backgrounds and knowledge. Sociofacts are expressed through the emphasis on community service, social responsibility, and participation in religious ceremonies. Teaching and learning are strongly linked to the acquisition of doctrinal knowledge, while formation extends to developing a relationship with God and the Catholic Church through a sensing of God's presence and following moral guidance. Mission, as perceived by the students, involves translating faith into practical action, making positive contributions to the growth of individuals and communities, especially vulnerable groups. Overall, Catholic education at St. Paul University Manila is characterized by a strong ideological foundation rooted in doctrine-based mentifacts and extends to sociofacts that emphasize ethical and empathetic actions. While artifacts are less emphasized, the study underscores the nuanced understanding of Catholic education as a holistic experience encompassing teaching, learning, formation, and mission.

Keywords: Catholic Education, Chinese Graduate Students, Catholic Identity Framework,

I. Introduction

The Chinese government has significantly tightened its oversight of religious practices in response to a growing number of adherents, leading to increased religious persecution and efforts to co-opt state-sanctioned religious organizations (Albert & Maizland, 2020). This strict control involves mandatory registration of all religious groups, including places of worship and organizations, with unregistered or underground groups facing potential repression (Chen, M., 2022). Additionally, the government has established patriotic associations for

various religions, such as the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Islamic Association, separate from global religious hierarchies, to promote government policies (Pew Research Center, 2023). The appointment of religious leaders, bowdlerization of religious texts, limitations on religious practices, exclusion of unregistered groups, closely monitored religious education, and extensive monitoring are other key elements of China's religious regulation and oversight (Reardon, 2019; Hua, 2020; US Mission China, 2019; UCA News Reporter, 2023; Hornemann, 2013; Meserole, 2020). Despite the above, there is an ongoing exodus of Chinese students to the Philippines to access international Catholic education. This exodus started in the 1960s (Reynolds, 1968) but is now even highlighted because of expanding efforts of various countries towards greater internationalization (Textor, 2023).

A growing trend of Chinese students pursuing international education in the Philippines is driven by several key factors. Firstly, the Philippines offers cost-effective education, with lower tuition fees and living expenses compared to Western countries (Global Times, 2019). Secondly, the country's reputation for English-medium instruction is attractive to Chinese students seeking proficiency in English for international career prospects (QQ English, 2022). The geographical proximity of the Philippines to China facilitates travel and connectivity for Chinese students (Qin, Fang, Lai, & Abbas, 2023). Additionally, some Philippine universities are internationally recognized for providing quality education (QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2023), and the diversity of programs, including medicine, engineering, business, and hospitality, accommodates various career goals and interests (Courses.com.ph, 2018). Lenient visa policies make it easier for Chinese students to obtain study visas (VisaGuide.World, 2023). Cultural exchange and exposure to a different social environment are further incentives (Yang & Tian, 2023), along with the perception of internship and employment opportunities, both within the Philippines and across Southeast Asia.

A study of the motivations of Chinese Graduate Students in the College of Music and the Performing Arts (Bantugan, 2022) revealed that Chinese students pursuing international education in the Philippines are driven by both internal and external motivations. Internally, they seek to enhance their knowledge in music, credentials, and personal growth. Improving knowledge in music is a major internal motivation, with a focus on systematic study, skill enhancement, and a deeper understanding of music, especially for those aware of the institution's quality of education. Chinese students also desire knowledge beyond their culture and the opportunity to broaden their horizons. Additionally, improving credentials is essential, especially for educators, to better teach students and combine Chinese and Western music. Self-improvement is related to widening horizons, skill application, and realizing personal academic goals. Externally, external motivations include impressive features of St. Paul University Manila, family support, fulfillment of teaching requirements, professional advancement, and social recognition in China. Knowledge of the host university, Chinese government endorsement, and educational legacy are key motivators. Family support plays a crucial role, and the pursuit of higher academic degrees is driven by professional advancement and institutional support. Ultimately, obtaining advanced degrees leads to social recognition in China. Apparently, the decision to enroll in St. Paul University Manila has very little to do with its being a Catholic school.

Study Framework. The Catholic Identity Framework (Catholic Identity, 2021) consists of four key dimensions: Learning & Teaching, Formation, Mission, and Culture. These dimensions serve as a foundation for a shared understanding and a common language within the context of Catholic education. The framework emphasizes a Christ-centered approach while allowing for diverse and authentic expressions. At its core, the focus is on people and relationships, including schools, communities, parishes, and families. The mission of BCE (presumably an educational institution) is to teach, challenge, and transform individuals within their communities, and it is a mission that is known, lived, embraced, and celebrated. Similarly, Catholic culture has three dimensions, according to Fantini and Fantini (1995), namely, mentifacts, sociofacts, and artifacts. Mentifacts are “what people think or believe”; sociofacts are “how people come together and for what purpose”;

and artifacts are “things people make” (p. 57). These three dimensions are taken here to constitute Catholic culture which manifests in Catholic identity and education.

Statement of the Problem. The question at hand, however, pertains to whether individuals who are not of the Catholic faith can identify themselves as Paulinians. What, then, should serve as the defining characteristic of Catholic education in terms of outcomes for Chinese students who have completed their academic degrees but remain non-Catholic? Is it possible for these students to, at the very least, acknowledge the fundamental aspects of their Catholic education, even if they choose not to convert to Catholicism? This study aims to uncover what, if anything, Chinese graduate students in the College of Education, headed by a religious Sister as of this writing, comprehend about their Catholic education, with the goal of revealing the depth of instruction of Catholic Paulinian education on individuals who are neither Christian nor religious.

II. Methodology

Twenty-nine Chinese graduate (PhD) students of the College of Education taking the Dissertation Writing class under the supervision of the main author of this paper were invited to answer an online open-ended survey via Google Forms Last August 15, 2023 in St. Paul University Manila and volunteered to do so. Four questions in the survey corresponded to personal information, while the rest are questions that investigated their understanding of Catholic education as a result of their enrollment in St. Paul University Manila starting August 2022. Their answers to the survey were read at least three times and were processed through a deductive thematic analysis guided by the four Catholic identity dimensions and three dimensions of culture.

III. Results

Catholic Identity Dimensions Articulated by Chinese Graduate Students

Catholic ‘Culture’ as Perceived by the Chinese Graduate Students. The three dimensions of culture were variably articulated by the participants. Catholic culture mentifacts were articulated more, followed by sociofacts and artifacts.

Catholic Mentifacts. Ideas learned by the Chinese graduate students stem primarily from the inputs on the Catholic doctrine. Knowledge on the doctrine include awareness of the core values that require teaching of “faith, hope, love, truth, justice, and peace”, following “the moral principles and guidance of the Church”, and translating “faith into practical action”. These are ideas which are found taught by “counselors and mentors with religious background and knowledge” in “religious courses in St. Paul University Manila covering Catholic beliefs, teachings, and practices” and shared through “tutoring and guidance” that help students “understand the core concepts of the Catholic doctrine, particularly, teachings about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, the sacraments, and morality”, “the meaning of the Catholic faith, and answer questions about matters of faith”. These ideas facilitate “joining an ancient faith, deeply rooted in... (said teachings) that is full of hope and vitality” as the “Good News of Jesus Christ” is spread in all corners of the Earth.

For another participant, they learned that “a Catholic is a Christian” who “believes in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, that there are three persons in one God, the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit (the Sanctifier) ... (or) in the Trinity”, “the incarnation, the sacraments, the magisterium, and the (consequent) social doctrine”. They point to the fundamental doctrine of the Catholic Church on which faith or “the desire to live by the teachings of Jesus (and accept his transforming love” is based. Another participant declared that being a Catholic means “sensing God’s presence and power sacramentally”. Another shared that this is also incorporated in “Catholic teachings, values, and traditions” and “curriculum and campus life”. Finally, one said the belief in the above translates to the “teaching philosophy” lectured by professors.

Catholic Artifacts. One participant “implied” artifacts the Catholic culture. One participant said Catholic teachings are “conveyed”; hence tools that help in conveying towards “understanding the responsibility and glory of being Catholic” are implicated. Another participant indirectly pointed to the Bible, with the mention of “biblical quotes”, and Catholic iconography with the mention of “statues”. These reflect a “strong Catholic culture... (especially embodied by) the Church and priest and nuns”.

Catholic Sociofacts. The relationships highlighted by the responses of the participants cover three areas of interaction: communities-in-need, the worship community, and the school. In relation to communities-in-need, one participant revealed that being a Catholic means promoting “active participation in community service and caring activities, especially those that help and support for vulnerable groups”. Another participant elaborated that the university teaches students “to have a sense of responsibility” that enable them “to love and share how to love and live in peace with others”. With respect to the school, they perceive the university’s being a Catholic institution by its holding of “regular Masses, prayer meetings, and other religious ceremonies where students can participate and “deepen their understanding of Catholic rituals and traditions” through the “Scriptures and breaking bread together” as is relevant to all Christians. Finally, the context of the school, the participants highlighted campus and off-campus “activities” and “preaching” and “teaching” that reflect in its “culture and media forms”. What bind these social engagements are “love, charity, and solidarity” that are characteristic of being Catholic and allow for making contributions to the “growth of Christians, social talents, and cultural development”, “exploration, and innovation” which “require” time to mature.

These engagements are founded on affective (“having a loving heart”), cognitive (“values such as social justice, compassion, ethics”), and behavioral (“treating everyone with respect and as equals”) empathy. Of the three domains of empathy, emotional empathy is most underscored with the mention of “caring” and “sympathizing” for “vulnerable groups” and “the weak”, and “putting people first”. And yet, among the three areas of Catholic culture, mentifacts are more elaborated than the other two aspects. Even sociofacts are expressed more as ideas instead of personal experiences. Artifacts are also mentioned in the context of disseminating ideas.

Catholic ‘Learning and Teaching’ as Perceived by the Chinese Graduate Students. ‘Learning and teaching’ was elaborated mostly through mentifacts as religious concepts, beliefs, and practices. Teaching was associated with instruction on “faith, hope, love, wisdom, truth, justice, and peace” that help “students understand the core concepts of the Catholic doctrine, including teachings about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, the sacraments, and morality”. They point mainly to content attached to Catholic religious education. Meanwhile, learning is associated with a resulting belief “in the Trinity”. Hence, teaching and learning is of to instruct on the essentials of the Catholic faith, at the very least.

Catholic ‘Formation’ as Perceived by the Chinese Graduate Students. Catholic formation, according to the participants, is markedly noticeable through the ideas learned and relationships formed by students. Mentifacts strongly articulated as reflective of Christian (in general) and Catholic (in particular) formation are identified with “following the moral principles and guidance of the (Catholic) Church” and “sensing God’s presence and power sacramentally” as a result of “individual tutoring and guidance” by “counselors and mentors” of St. Paul University Manila “inside and outside of the campus”. Formation is externalized as “active participation (of students) in community service” and leading towards the “matur(ing)” of “a loving heart”.

Catholic ‘Mission’ as Perceived by the Chinese Graduate Students. For the participants, the Catholic mission means “translat(ing) faith into practical action” that “make positive contributions to the

growth of Christians, social talents, and cultural development. Such actions stem from “a desire to live by the teachings of Jesus, to accept his transforming love” and are shaped by “caring activities...” (that) “put people first” and “especially help and support... vulnerable groups” as it is driven by “a sense of social responsibility, respect for others, honest(y), sympath(y) with others, and... the weak”.

IV. Discussions

The Catholic identity in St. Paul University Manila education was most evident in mentifacts and sociofacts. Artifacts that were the most obvious were the only one talked about. Mentifacts are doctrine-based and mostly sourced from knowledge in religious education classes. Hence, these mentifacts are known formally and in the academic setting. They are also dominantly theoretical than practical, indicating a lack of maturity in the knowledge of the Catholic faith. A mature Catholic faith would have manifested greater integration of the doctrine in one’s daily life, and consequently, more narratives that are closely tied to one’s way of life, instead of lessons in class. Nevertheless, the influence of these formal doctrine classes on the participants is significant in that they remember the fundamentals clearly, thanks to the facilitation of professors, counselors, and tutors. Meanwhile, sociofacts of Catholic education were understood to extend outside of the classroom and campus and constructed by three spaces of social engagement (needy communities, school, and worship), social responsibility, and sharing in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church.

Teaching and learning appear mostly associated with ideas at the core of the Catholic faith derived from religious education that seek to facilitate a movement from learning to knowing to believing in the Trinity and teachings about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, the sacraments, and morality. Formation, on the other hand, expands knowledge of the Catholic doctrine to a relationship with God (through a sensing of God’s presence and power in the sacraments) and the Catholic Church (by following its moral principles and guidance). Thus, teaching and learning is understood as not synonymous with formation, and, as such, reveal a more nuanced understanding of the levels of Catholic education that are embedded in a Catholic school like St. Paul University Manila.

Mission is understood as that which makes Catholic identity relevant to the world outside of the school and the Catholic community. The participants express their understanding of the mission by highlighting actions that bring about change in the world as a result of believing in the foundations of the Catholic faith. These ethical and empathic actions are directed towards the most needy and vulnerable. These actions acknowledge the transformative power of faith as it inspires believers to respond according to the examples of Jesus Christ.

The answers of the participants show that Catholic education in St. Paul University Manila is ideologically strong and that action is more driven by affiliation with the Catholic Church's teachings than immediate response to needs of people. Catholic education, then, as expressed by the integration of all the participants’ responses, is a mission stemming first from belief of Catholic doctrine through learning and teaching, followed by an identification with the Catholic Church through formation, and participating in the mission that Jesus Christ inspired. This Catholic education has least association with artifacts vis-a-vis mentifacts and sociofacts.

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