

Chair's Report 2004

1. General

The year of the monkey has given way to the Year of the Rooster and we ask, what has the Rooster to say of the Monkey? And in these early days of the year, what has the Rooster to say of itself?

What of China? The huge coastal cities of China continue to develop apace, almost it seems recklessly, in their hunger for the economic progress which it is hoped will bring a better life, content and happiness to all of its people. Business is out to attract foreign investment and become an integral part of the world's story. Our shops, like those in Europe and America are flooded with cheap Chinese goods while our universities delight in their great number of Chinese students, both undergraduate and postgraduate throughout the land.

In order to prevent drop-out of such valuable students, universities are working extremely hard to improve the support services offered to them in their respective international schools. The money all international students – and the Chinese are the largest ethnic minority – bring to the universities has become vital to the future and success of research and teaching in our universities and is a significant part of our national budget.

In the Arts, China, so renowned for patterning its art on respected masters, is seeing a kind of renaissance. The recent exhibition, 'Eastward Ho!' at the V. & A. was enlightening, the Chinese prints on show at The British Museum won great critical acclaim, Chinese dance, for example, 'Bamboo Dreams' performed by Taiwanese dancers in London recently was described as superb by experts in the field. The martial artistry of Chinese films fascinates us and satisfies our taste for the new and other. Chinese writers may come to emulate Anglo-Indian writers. Xinran and her true stories of Chinese women have been an eye-opener for many.

One had only to be aware of London's China Town celebrations to see the breadth and vigour of Chinese popular arts. At home, in China, though, artists have to be careful. Drama is at an all time low as it not considered appropriate to express the truth about life as drama, of course, has to do. The two renowned women writers, Jung Chang, author of 'Wild Swans' and Xinran, author of 'The Good Women of China', are both significantly now resident in this country.

Rural China, and the vast majority of Chinese are rural people, is a very different country from urban China. Big Brother no longer offers the iron rice-bowl or assures the people that all their needs will be looked after. Charity is making a come-back!

Poverty rules. And what poverty!

Problems are many and complex, underlined by local corruption. 'Searching for work', as unemployment is described in China, is acute and has been since the mid 1990's when the government decided to close all state-owned, non-profit making factories. This move brought and still brings tremendous hardship to

many. Poverty and unemployment leads to civil unrest and the fearful clashes between Han and Hui people witness to trouble ahead. The selling of blood in order to send the one allowed child to school is still going on in the villages, despite the unhygienic conditions leading to HIV/ AIDS and the deaths of parents. In the 1990's drug-trafficking was evident in the South-West, where the Yunan-Guizhou Highway emerges from the area of Asia's Golden Triangle. It is on the increase.

The gender-balance is yet another problem. The norm worldwide is 100 male births to 107 female births. In Hainan Island we have the extreme situation of 135 male births to 100 female births. This picture is reflected throughout China. So there is a trafficking in women, which goes beyond China's borders, encompassing women from Vietnam and North Korea. The going rate is 300 yuan (about £24) per woman. There is also an underworld of kidnapping village women and young boys. Then on an international level, we have the Snake Heads Traffickers about which we've read in the Morecombe Bay disaster. And all that's still going on! Environmental degradation is rife in China as are horrific industrial accidents.

What of the Churches? They carry on, despite recent restrictive legislation. See the interview with Bishop Li on page 12.

2. Formation / Education

CEC has enabled four students from Mainland China to study in the UK. One priest is studying Pastoral Theology and another, Philosophy in Heythrop College of London University while two others, a priest and a lay person (woman!) are studying at St. Anselm's in Margate. These two should have a worthwhile contribution to make towards the psychological and spiritual formation of priests, religious sisters and lay people on their return to China.

3. Catholic Academic Institute Links

In October of last year, during the usual visit to China, CEC members began a process of academic dialogues with three institutes: The Institute for Culture and Christianity in Beijing, The Catholic Seminary in Shanghai and Fudan University also in Shanghai. We are gradually building links between these and Catholic academic institutes in the UK. We hope to have a return visit from a Chinese delegation soon.

4. Theological Literature

One of the problems in China is a severe lack of resources: books, periodicals, tapes, etc., especially keen in houses of Christian formation. Currently there is a real desire for the new 'Compendium of Social Doctrine in the Church'. To get such writings into the hands of future priests, of lay people and religious could do much towards the salvation of China.

5. Teachers in China

CEC has four teachers working in third level institutes in China and one more is preparing to go this September and participate in this novel form of Catholic witness in China.

6. Exposure Trip to China

Eight people spent a fortnight in China last October. They were Bishop Bernard Longley of Westminster Archdiocese, Sr Margaret Walsh, Director of Manchester University's Ecumenical College, Mr. David Williams of The General Council of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Ms. Susan O'Brien, Chair of Directors of The Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge, Father John Dale, National Director of The Pontifical Mission Society, Bishop Ian Murray of Argyll and The Isles in Scotland, Mr. Richard McCready, National Secretary of The Justice and Peace Commission in Scotland and Father Eamonn O'Brien, Director of CEC. This group met and discussed with a wide variety of lay people and sisters as well as with some priests and bishops in urban and rural areas. In Hong Kong the group attracted media attention and some, on returning home, got a lot of press coverage for their visit and for The Church in China.

7. Awareness in the UK

Two such conferences were held, co-sponsored by their respective dioceses. One was in a very windy Liverpool, in the crypt of the Cathedral and Archbishop Kelly honoured us with his presence. Participants learned about both Catholic and Protestant Churches in China, heard two returned volunteers speaking about their time of teaching English in Guiyang Medical College in one of China's poorest provinces, Guizhou, and enjoyed the various items of interest on display.

The second conference was in the Arundel and Brighton Diocese, in Crawley. Both Catholic and non-Catholic participants showed interest. The venue was an attractive parish hall and the pattern followed that of the Liverpool conference. In all about 40 people gave up their Saturdays to learn about The Church in China and in the pre conference publicity phase 289 parishes, 831 religious/ missionary groups and schools and 495 individuals were alerted to the Church in China.

8. Working with Other Churches

Speakers affiliated to Friends of The Church in China (FCC) spoke at both conferences and informed us of the situation regarding Protestant Churches in China. Our links with the China Desk of Churches together in Britain and Ireland is a most valuable network for us.

9. Support for Catholic Network in UK interested in China

Our AGM report, the FCC-CEC magazine, and press coverage on the delegation that visited China last October has been sent to all CEC members, links and conference contacts. Our first publication, *'Human Rights, Religious Freedom, and The Catholic Church in China'* was widely publicized along with our 'Teach in China' programme flier. Both were sent to all university chaplains. In addition, CEC has responded to numerous requests for information on China and its Churches, and has supported a number of Chinese people in the UK.

10. Response to Chinese students in the UK

Discussions have begun with Catholic university chaplains in order to see how we can best respond to the many Chinese students in our universities. The possibility of an Ecumenical Chaplaincy Visit to China is currently being explored.

11. Final Words

Perhaps China's rapid, headlong strides into modernity can be reflected in comparing two phenomena, one being the foot-binding of women. Yes, you can still see minute and dignified Chinese women tottering among the back streets of their country on four-inch 'lotus feet'.

Now, their younger counterparts spend considerable resources having their limbs structurally lengthened in cosmetic departments of Beijing's hospital! Those with spending power will stop at nothing! Yet there are idealists among those same young people wanting to improve the lot of their fellow country people.

What is needed? Prayer for China. We mustn't downgrade the importance of intercessory prayer. 'More things are wrought by prayer/ Than this world dreams of' as one of our poet laureates said (Tennyson, 'Morte d'Arthur') and we know what Jesus said before him on the same topic!

Secondly, awareness. We need to keep ourselves abreast with how things are for the people of China and the Church of China and find ways of supporting and befriending them. What about making China your special country and becoming a member of CEC?

Thirdly, doing what we can to help, becoming volunteers or encouraging others to do so. Older, retired people, in particular can make a tremendous contribution to China and enhance their own lives by donating a year or so to China. Offering hospitality at times like Christmas to a Chinese student. The students can get unbearably lonely and I had two of them crying in the chaplaincy, missing their families at Chinese New Year time. Financial support is always urgently needed and gratefully welcomed. Perhaps you have some ideas of your own too!

Sr Patricia Collins SHJM