

February 2024

The Missionary and the Pea: An Anthropological Study of the French MEP Economy

Michel Chambon

Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics, chambonmc@yahoo.fr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [French Linguistics Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chambon, Michel (2024) "The Missionary and the Pea: An Anthropological Study of the French MEP Economy," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 4. p.102-133.

DOI: [10.32436/2475-6423.1147](https://doi.org/10.32436/2475-6423.1147)

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol8/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Global Catholicism by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.



Catholicism & Cultures

ISSUE 8 | VOLUME 2

Journal of GLOBAL CATHOLICISM

WINTER 2024

TOWARDS AN ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY OF CATHOLICISM IN THE AGE OF POPE FRANCIS

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Marc Loustau / Editor's Introduction
- Samuel Weeks and George Wu Bayuga / Introduction: Towards an Economic Anthropology of Catholicism, in the Age of Pope Francis
- Samuel Weeks / From Canonical Law to Offshore Finance: Confessing to Priests and Bankers in Luxembourg
- George Wu Bayuga / A Queer Chinese Pilgrimage: Encountering Catholic Life In Manila
- Elayne Oliphant / The Double Bond of Catholic Abolition: Christianity, Chattel Slavery, and Racial Capitalism
- Michel Chambon / The Missionary and the Pea: An Anthropological Study of the French MEP Economy
- Commentary
- Mathew N. Schmalz / Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Mary Dunn
- Mathew N. Schmalz / Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Matthew Eggemeier and Peter Fritz
- Mathew N. Schmalz / Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Richard Wood



COLLEGE OF THE
Holy Cross

Photo credit: Thomas M. Landy

MICHEL CHAMBON

The Missionary and the Pea: An Anthropological Study of the French MEP Economy



Michel Chambon is a French Catholic theologian and a cultural anthropologist interested in Christianity in Asia. He has published research on the agency of Christian buildings in China, Chinese Pentecostalism, and Chinese Catholic nuns. His most recent book, *Making Christ Present in China Actor-Network Theory and the Anthropology of Christianity*, examines the five Christian denominations of Nanping (Fujian Province) in order to question the ways social science theorizes the unity and diversity of Christianity. He coordinates the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics.

INTRODUCTION

It was his first vacation away from Singapore. And it was the Fall of 1962, a season when Southern China's weather is ideal. Father Martin Dupont was resting for a few weeks in Hong Kong at the retreat house of his missionary society.¹ Since January 31, 1957, he had been serving Catholics in Singapore, where the *Missions Etrangères de Paris* (MEP) had sent him. But in 1960, the MEP's General Assembly decided that missionaries could take vacations more regularly. Every six years, they were allowed to return to France for a few months. In the meantime, they were also entitled to spend one month at Béthanie, the society's sanatorium in Hong Kong. The property was a beautiful colonial-style building erected on the southern slope of Hong Kong Island for the physical rest and spiritual renewal of MEP missionaries. Surrounded by dairy pastures, the place was quiet and the view of the ocean was majestic.

During his stay in Béthanie, Father Dupont was not alone. A few colleagues coming from various parts of Asia were also on vacation. Once a week, they would go for a one-day excursion either to Lantau's Trappist monastery, Macao, or to the New Territories. And during their month in Hong Kong, they would be invited for lunch at the procure. This was the headquarters of the MEP procurators, who were in charge of managing the financial and material resources of the society.

On the designated day, a car would arrive in Béthanie around 11 a.m. and drive the missionaries to the procure. The house was on 1 May Road on the edge of the central district climbing the slope of the peak tram. The gathering would start with a traditional “*apéro*,” a time preceding the meal during which guests would sit in the living room and share a glass of European alcohol and some snacks while breaking the ice. At 12:30 p.m. sharp, lunch was served in the dining room. It was a typical French meal, with an entrée, main course, cheese, bread, dessert, and black coffee. The whole visit was designed to last one hour, no longer.

Sixty years later, Father Dupont does not remember his conversation with the procurators. But what stays in his mind is what was on the table. On that day, green

¹ All names in this article have been anonymized.

peas were served. And for a missionary in Asia, it was rare to find this French delicacy on his table. Apparently, one procurator was an enthusiast gardener² who cultivated the legume on the property and enabled the house to serve it. And these peas are what Father Dupont still remembers today. Surprisingly, he is not alone in this kind of selective memory. Father Jo Blanc, another MEP sent to Singapore in 1957, has similar reminiscences. When I met him for the first time in June 2022 at the Singaporean MEP house, he enthusiastically shared stories about his early missionary life and his memorable vacation in Hong Kong. Like Fr. Dupont, Fr. Blanc remembers well his stay at Béthanie in 1963. Again, an important detail that he quickly mentioned was the exact menu. Almost sixty years later, Father Blanc still talks about the “*vol-au-vent*” (a savory delicacy with puff pastry) and the “*gigot aux haricots*” (lamb with beans) of that day.

But why are these menus important? What are *apéros*, pea, *vol-au-vent*, and other French recipes revealing about the kind of economy and collective identity that the MEP promotes? What do these culinary details say about their relations to food and goods in general? What kind of religious dynamics and economy do they unfold? This paper explores the system through which the French missionary society connects humans and material objects to discuss their underlying economy from an anthropological perspective.³ Here, the term economy is taken in a broad sense. It is not restricted to the financial flows of wealth. Rather, it encompasses the circulations of people and objects across time and places. Thus, investigating the MEP economy is not an effort to unveil their financial strength and banking strategies, but more importantly, the way they distinctively interconnect people, places, and goods to ultimately discuss the religious project that lies behind those circulations.

Unlike the Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans, the MEP has attracted limited academic attention. Scholarly research is mostly led by historians who focus on

2 In addition to informal gardeners (or *jardinier du dimanche*), the society has included recognized botanists such as Emile Bodinier (1842-1901 - China), Jean Marie Delavay (1834-1895), and Paul Farges (1844-1912). They illustrate the long and methodological attention that some members of the society have paid to their natural environment. More information on this can be found on the MEP France-Asia Research Institute (IRFA) <https://irfa.paris/en/>.

3 I want to thank the two anonymous reviewers who gave precious suggestions to improve this paper.



the political dimension of their missionary work in China, Korea, or Vietnam.⁴ While the MEP regular sponsors the production of books about their history and mission, there is no comprehensive analysis of the society as a whole.⁵ They are usually approached from their past and within the national framework of one of their missionary presences.⁶ If scholarly attention given to the controversies and competitions that the MEP have had with other Catholic organizations has allowed more systematic analyses to emerge, critical research on their current realities remains almost nonexistent and little attention is given to their resilient distinctions.⁷

This study focuses on the ways in which the MEP connects people and material objects in order to deploy an anthropological analysis of their Catholic economy. By briefly revisiting the long history of the society in two Asian locations and its way of recruiting and assigning missionaries today, this paper unveils how the MEP underscores the ecclesial predominance of local territories in their way of circulating people and goods. Going beyond particular locations in Asia and contingent po-

-
- 4 Ernest P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China's Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Pierre-Emmanuel Roux, *La croix, la baleine et le canon: la France face à la Corée au milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2012). Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam a Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- 5 Jean Guennou, *Missions Etrangères de Paris* (Paris: Fayard Le Sarmant, 1986). Gilles Van Grasdorff, *La Belle Histoire des Missions Etrangères 1658-200* (Paris: Perrin, 2007). Françoise Fauconnet-Buzelin, *Un Evêque au Pays des Talapoins* (Paris: Cerf, 2021). Louis Laneau, *Premier Vicaire Apostolique du Siam 1637-1696* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2021).
- 6 Jean Michaud, "Missionary Ethnographers in Upper-Tonkin: The Early Years, 1895-1920," *Asian Ethnicity* 5, no. 2 (2004): 179-94. Motonori Makino, "The Missionary Work of the Société Des Missions Étrangères de Paris and Its Catechists in Vietnam," *Southeast Asia: History and Culture* 35 (2006): 3-21. Patrick Beillevaire, "La participation de la Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris à l'ouverture intellectuelle du Japon dans les derniers temps du régime shôgunal," *Histoire & Missions Chrétiennes* 7, no. 3 (2008): 79-105. Andrew Finch, "A Necessary and Fruitful Labour: The Société Des Missions Etrangères de Paris and the Formation of a Native Clergy in Korea, c. 1836-66," *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 81 (2008): 280-91. Shanthini Pillai, "The Synecism of Catholic Faith and Citizenship in Peninsular Malaysia," *Social Sciences and Missions* 34, no. 3-4 (2021): 335-65.
- 7 Eugenio Menegon, *Ancestors, Virgins, & Friars Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Catherine Marin, ed., *La Société des Missions étrangères de Paris, 350 ans à la rencontre de l'Asie 1658-2008* (Paris: Karthala, 2010). Ji Li, *Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) and China from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (Boston: Brill, 2021). Mirela Altic, "Geographical Knowledge as Power: The Role of the Society of Jesus and the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris in the Early Exploration of Louisiana," *Terrae Incognitae* 54, no. 1 (2022): 5-37.

litical contexts, I argue that the MEP economy is rooted in an untheorized French understanding of culture, which cautiously integrates the socio-cultural role of collective material roots. While scholarly attention has focused on the variety of Catholic inculturation processes, an effort to translate and adapt the Catholic faith into a particular cultural setting, this paper sheds light on the kind of Frenchness that MEP missionaries intentionally cultivate to inform their religious project in Asia. Taking food as an example among others, I argue that the peas were not fundamentally served to demonstrate a social status, an accumulation of wealth, or a certain French snobbism, but to cultivate a sense of material and sensorial belonging that shapes not only the MEP religious discourse but also their way of connecting and regulating relations between people, places, and goods.

Elaborating on the emphasis that the MEP puts on keeping missionaries *Ad Vitam* in dioceses where the society has historical ties, their maintenance of regional houses where they can occasionally rest, speak French among themselves, and share French culinary traditions, as well as their recruitment and assignment policies, I argue that their religious ideology is built upon the French notion of “*terroir*,” which emphasizes the lasting and material relations that people have to their place of origin and its land.

The notion of *terroir* is initially tied to agricultural production and cultural traits while involving a body of laws and economic interests. Historically, it has been associated with the local production of various wines, cheeses, or other cultural products. *Terroir*, “the taste of place,” implies that the flavor of a product, and therefore its value, is deeply tied to the material features of its soil of origin as well as to the local knowledge and practices of that specific place. This constructed taste of place is “the spectrum of appreciable flavors or fragrances created by the unique physiographic constitution of the plot of land where a given product was grown and produced.”⁸ Even if some techniques of production could be delocalized, a true Saint-Emilion wine or an authentic Comté cheese cannot be produced anywhere else than their place of origin. There is a lasting relationship between a plot of land, the techniques of production, and a product that defines its intrinsic quality, au-

8 Thomas Parker, *Tasting French Terroir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 2.

thenticity, flavor, and value. Rooted in “*terre*” (French for soil), *terroir* emphasizes the physiological link between a product and its original site of growth and production.

Initially applied to edible goods only, the idea of *terroir* has become relevant across a wide range of cultural productions as well as within scholarly conversations on cultural changes, political ecology, and national identity. Scholars have extensively discussed how the French notion of *terroir* relates to geography, locale identities, national cohesion, history, and methods of production.⁹ For instance, Ulin analyzes how small cooperatives of winemakers in Bordeaux (France) have underscored the idea of *terroir* as a way to identify themselves with the unique wine they produce and make themselves distinct from larger competitors.¹⁰ Parker unveils how the notion of *terroir* has a long-term historical background informing the French representation of national unity and diversity.¹¹ And in Asia, anthropologist Brendan Galipeau has used the concept to discuss the identity and place-making project that winemakers in Shangri-La (China), a former MEP mission, are deploying today.¹²

In the case of the MEP, I argue that their religious economy is indeed informed by the notion of *terroir* and therefore emphasizes the intrinsic link that people, goods, and places supposedly have. This insistence on the relation to land not only provides the foundation to develop anthropological discourses but also a way to reconcile unity and diversity among social and ecclesial entities. Often, during my interviews, MEP priests insisted on the importance of being rooted (*enracinement* in French).¹³ In their management of human and economic resources, they believe

9 Amy B. Trubek, *The Taste of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Parker, *Tasting French Terroir*.

10 Robert C. Ulin, *Vintages and Traditions: An Ethnohistory of Southwest French Wine Cooperatives* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996). Robert C. Ulin, “Work as Cultural Production: Labour and Self-identity among Southwest French Wine-growers,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8, no. 4 (2002): 691–712.

11 Parker, *Tasting French Terroir*.

12 Brendan A. Galipeau, “Tibetan Wine Production, Taste of Place, and Regional Niche Identities in Shangri-La, China,” in *Trans-Himalayan Borderlands: Livelihoods, Territorialities, Modernities*, ed. Dan Smyer Yü and Jean Michaud (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 207–28.

13 This article does not apply a systematic linguistic analysis of the discourses and texts promoted by the MEP. Yet, in this vast corpus of statements, publications, and sermons, the lexicon of land/field/soil/roots is constantly mobilized. For instance, in his Epiphany letter of 2020, Father Gilles Reit-

that Catholicism is not a mere multinational homogenous network of religious institutions and spiritualities with off-shore sets of practices, administrators, and centers of power. Infused by a deep taste of place, the MEP cultivate their relationships with clearly identified Asian places. They do not constantly reassign missionaries from place to place. Growing roots in a specific context, individually and collectively, is essential for them. As we will see, their priests are coming from one country (France) and are assigned to one Asian country for the rest of their lives. The two links, origin and destination, matter and are cultivated through various mechanisms. This cultivation of roots shapes the MEP economy. Subsequently, the MEP, in line with the dominant ideology of modern Catholicism, sees the Catholic Church primarily as the communion of local churches, a juxtaposition of diverse territorialized communities, each deeply intertwined with its indigenous history, geographic specificities, and socio-economic conditions.

The data presented in this paper was collected through several means. In addition to consulting the rich MEP archives, their monthly review “*Missions Etrangères de Paris*,” and secondhand publications, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 MEP fathers who currently live in Hong Kong, Paris, Singapore, or Thailand. Over the past 19 years, I have also interacted with numerous other MEP fathers, either by studying with them in France, cultivating friendships in Taiwan and Hong Kong, or visiting their missions in Thailand, Cambodia, and South Korea. Finally, between 2003 and 2006, I spent three years as a pastoral worker in Hong Kong serving the local Church within the MEP group.¹⁴ In some sense, this paper is built upon the experiences and conversations shared during *apéro* and meals taken at MEP houses in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, Hualian, and Paris.

This paper begins with a brief introduction to the MEP followed by a historical review of their presence in Thailand and Hong Kong. These Asian parts of the MEP entanglements are then complicated by a presentation of their missionary recruit-

heinger, General Superior of the MEP wrote: “There is one of the goals of the missionary: proclaim and let the plant grow on its own rhythm according to the customs of the country.”

14 Michel Chambon, *Making Christ Present in China: Actor-Network Theory and the Anthropology of Christianity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11-12.

ment in France and assignments in Asia.¹⁵ Holding the French and Asian wings of the MEP system together without being exhaustive about the internal diversity of this religious network, I finally discuss the French notion of *terroir* which, I argue, deeply informs their religious agenda and Catholic economy until today.

LOCALIZING THE MEP WITHIN GLOBAL CATHOLICISM

Established in the 1650s-1660s through the initiative of lay members of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement with the support of Pope Clement X and Alexander VII, the *Missions Etrangères de Paris* are an association of diocesan priests devoted to missionary work in foreign lands. As their constitution of 1659 states, the MEP seek to bring the Catholic faith to non-Christians and train a local clergy. As part of the 17th-century French school of spirituality, the society stands as a modern effort to establish and strengthen Latin Catholic communities around the world.¹⁶ Although their missionary work was initially not restricted to a geographical area, they gradually specialized in Asia and played an important role in establishing local parishes, dioceses, and social institutions across that continent.¹⁷ Over the centuries, “the society, which served as a model for some ten similar [missionary] societies, has been responsible for creating 120 dioceses [across Asia], consecrating 270 bishops, and training some 2,000 [Asian] priests, primarily at its seminary in Penang.”¹⁸

As a society of secular priests incardinated in French dioceses and not a religious order with a distinct rule and spirituality, the MEP was a new kind of Catholic institution. Their creation was part of the broader Catholic reformation and meant

15 This paper is not an exhaustive presentation of the entire society but an attempt to anthropologically discuss its cultural traits. Nothing is said about the MEP news agency, extensive archives and research center (IRFA), or programs to help Asian clergy members to study abroad. And while I briefly mention the existence of MEP volunteers, I do not have the necessary space to methodologically present them.

16 Françoise Fauconnet-Buzelin, “Réforme Romaine et Esprit français. La Société Des Missions Étrangères de Paris,” *Revue Des Sciences Religieuses* 80, no. 2 (2006): 167–78.

17 Altic, “Geographical Knowledge as Power.” Guennou, *Missions Etrangères de Paris*. Van Grasdorff, *La Belle Histoire des Missions Etrangères*.

18 Hervé Legrand, “Société Des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP),” in *Religion Past and Present*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

to balance the influence of transnational religious orders like the Dominicans and the Franciscans as well as the secular powers of that time, like the Spanish and Portuguese Crowns. Unlike medieval Christianity which was primarily structured around transversal networks of monasteries and religious orders, leading actors of the Post-Tridentine Church were determined to give supremacy to localized entities (the dioceses and their parishes) and their superiors (diocesan bishops and parish priests). The MEP was in line with this structural mutation in which a new administrative relationship between delimited territories and the faithful became a structuring pattern of modernizing Catholicism.

Still, as a society of French missionaries who are sent abroad, the MEP was and remains a transregional reality that transfers people to distant places while proclaiming the predominance and autonomy of local dioceses. Even if the MEP aims at strengthening the ecclesial and theological prevalence of local Churches over religious orders and specific spiritualities (Franciscan, Carmelite, etc.), they remain a transnational reality. They send French priests with a certain cultural background, multilingual skills, and social network into the local clergy of an Asian diocese. This paper discusses this tension and, through the notion of *terroir*, unveils the type of Catholic economy behind it.

To explore the concrete and polymorph features of their missionary action, the next two sections revisit successively the long-term presence of the MEP in Siam and Hong Kong. The mission in Siam offers a rather typical case study to understand the long-lasting MEP engagement with Asian populations. Yet, to enlarge and complexify our understanding of their transregional circulations, I then present their rear base in Hong Kong where they have developed an alternative presence. Together, these two Asian sites will help us to sense the ways the MEP has been operating over time and places — and their underlying economy.

LANDING IN SIAM

The MEP presence in the Gulf of Siam has been a long and non-linear journey. Since 1662, Siam-Thailand has been one of their most strategic — but small —

Asian posts. When the MEP arrived in Ayutthaya, the capital of the kingdom already hosted ten Portuguese priests and one Spanish priest serving more than 2,000 Catholics, mostly Eurasians as well as Japanese who had fled persecution. To connect with the local Thai, the Vicar Apostolic Louis Laneau (1637-1696) developed a deep friendship and religious dialogue with Buddhist monks and court members while deploying Christian charitable work around the mission's compound.¹⁹ Since the kingdom was central in the region, relatively stable, and welcoming to foreigners, the MEP also built a modest training center for young Asian boys with the hope of ordaining them as priests and building an Asian Catholic clergy.²⁰ Yet, religious quarrels with Dominicans and Jesuits, political intrigues between France and Siam, and the Siamese revolution in 1688 ruined most of their efforts and excluded Catholicism from the emerging national identity of the Thai populations. In Siam, the number of Catholics has always remained modest, and Catholicism has been mostly made up of marginalized populations.

Nonetheless, the MEP had continued to gather young Asian men at their training center to initiate them to Catholic doctrines and clerical ethos. Until the Burmese invasion in 1765, their school for catechists and priests remained near the Siamese capital. Then, after a few years of peregrination between Cambodia and Pondicherry, it was finally relocated in 1808 to the island of Penang (today's Malaysia), a British colonial territory and a missionary hub.²¹ Under British rule, the College General became a major MEP institution and trained hundreds of Asian clergymen. In 1971, the MEP followed the guidelines of Vatican II and transferred their College General to the collective supervision of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Diocese of Penang, and Diocese of Malacca-Johor. This transfer also solved a recurrent difficulty of the MEP religious agenda. They may widely advertise their commitment to the formation of an Asian clergy, but finding suitable educators among French missionaries to supervise years of training was rarely an easy task. For many MEP

19 Louis Laneau, *De deificatione justorum per Jesum Christum* (Hong Kong: Typis Societatis Missionum ad Exteros, 1887).

20 Fauconnet-Buzelin, *Un Evêque au Pays des Talapoins*.

21 Jean Elizabeth DeBernardi, *Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819-2000* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020).

fathers, evangelization among non-Christians has long been more appealing than the monotonous classrooms of a seminary.

Besides the College General, the MEP did not disengage from missionary work among populations of the modernizing Thai kingdom. During the entire 19th century, growing local roots remained their priority. With the approval of the new monarchy and the support of local populations, they established several missions across the country, erected churches, and sponsored modern dispensaries. Moving away from a missionary model based on itinerant pastoral visits, they built local schools and churches where foreign religious congregations like the Salesians, Franciscans, and Sister of St Paul of Chartres were invited to help. And to support the expansion of these Catholic institutions, the MEP relied on a variety of financial resources. For instance, between 1891-1897, the construction of the Holy Rosary Church in Bangkok was largely supported by the Kiam Hoa Heng, a trading company located in Singapore, Bangkok, and Shantou in which the MEP were a minor shareholder. The company was first established in Bangkok in the late 1860s by a Chinese man, Jacob Low Kiok Liang (1843-1911), who had migrated to Singapore from Shantou, and by Joseph Chan Teck Hee (1844-1930). Jacob Low was a banking assistant of a MEP father established in Singapore, and his company soon provided generous revenues to the local MEP mission.²² In 1909, the Chan and Low families also helped renovate Bangkok's Assumption Cathedral. And in 1925, the Kiam Hoa Heng company bought land in Bangkok and constructed a building for a Carmelite convent.

However, Catholicism in Thailand remained deeply associated with foreign identities, either through the French roots of its missionaries or the Chinese background of many churchgoers. Despite the diversification of missionary congregations coming to the kingdom (Redemptorists, Salesians, Jesuits, etc.), Catholicism never attracted many Thai converts and the state maintained an ambiguous relation to it. For instance, after the Franco-Thai border conflict in 1940, the government closed Catholic schools, confiscated properties, and jailed clergy members.²³ Later, peace

22 Marc Sebastian Rerceretnam, *A History of Immigrant Roman Catholics and Converts in Early Singapore 1832-1945* (Singapore: M.S. Rerceretnam, 2021), 71-76.

23 Shane Strate, "An Uncivil State of Affairs: Fascism and Anti-Catholicism in Thailand, 1940-1944,"

came back and the MEP were able to resume their apostolate.

With the Second Council of the Vatican and its call to strengthen the autonomy of local Churches, leadership positions were gradually transferred to local clergymen and Rome appointed Thai priests as bishops. In 1976, MEP bishops were leading only three dioceses of the country.²⁴ And in the 1980s, if 40 MEP were still engaged in missionary work across Thailand, none of them was an acting bishop. They were serving as priests in local parishes or with marginalized populations. Today the country remains deeply Buddhist and Christians are a minority. In 2010, the government stated that the kingdom counted 379,617 Catholics for a total of 486,000 Christians within a Thai population of 69.42 million.²⁵

In 2020, 11 MEP priests were serving in the kingdom, including five under 60-years-old.²⁶ In downtown Bangkok, the society owns a plot of land where a parochial church and a MEP house stand. There, a French priest supports the local Church and various pastoral activities. He also ministers to the French-speaking Catholic community while supervising the MEP house and accommodating passing-by guests. Three young MEP priests are working in the Western and mountainous parts of the country near Myanmar's border. They engage with marginalized indigenous populations like the Karen people, bring means of socio-economic development, and make the presence of the Christian God tangible through pastoral visits and liturgical services. Their missions also host young French adults who volunteer for a few months in Mae Sot and Mae Tawo.²⁷ Over the past few years, those MEP volunteers have facilitated the creation of a fair-trade network between France and Thailand named "*Terres Karens*" (Karens' Soil).²⁸ Interestingly, these marketing efforts to sell Karen products (handicrafts, house decoration, traditional fabric, etc.) through interconnections with religious networks relies on a discourse

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 42, no. 1 (2011): 59-87.

24 All MEP bishops had resigned by 1977 and left their seats to local bishops.

25 See <https://www.ucanews.com/directory/country/thailand/31>, consulted on July 1st 2022.

26 *Missions Etrangères de Paris* N°555, 565, 576, and 587.

27 Watch *A Deafening Silence*, a documentary from France 24 on alleged sexual abuse among the MEP.

28 See the French Association, 'Terres Karens' (Karen's soil) made by MEP volunteers to support fair trade between France and Karen populations: <https://terres-karens.org>, consulted on July 1st 2022.

about ethnic authenticity and local traditions which directly echoes the French notion of *terroir*.

Nevertheless, most of the other MEP fathers living in Thailand are now serving local parishes of the lowland. Within these ecclesial structures, they perform rather conventional pastoral care combined with missionary efforts.²⁹ Two young MEP fathers are also teaching theology and biblical studies at Bangkok's seminary. When we met in Bangkok in October 2022 to discuss their missionary engagement, one explained to me that the local Church is strong enough to have well-trained professors. Yet, by serving at the seminary, the French priests diffuse what they consider “the spirit of missionary life” and deploy one of their historical missions, supporting the training of local clergy. Although this MEP acknowledged the skills of Thai priests for administering Catholic institutions, he also thought that the local clergy could be more proactive in reaching out and bringing the Gospel to those who have never heard about it, regardless of their ethnic and economic status. In other words, the MEP do not promote aggressive proselytism but encourage the Thai clergy to cross religious boundaries established by political and religious actors. At the same time, the MEP maintains their presence in Thailand because many argue that their society has a moral and religious duty towards this specific territory. Infused by a sense of *terroir* and of their own history, the MEP feels obliged towards Thailand.

In sum, Thailand provides a case study through which one can perceive how the MEP has long engaged with Asian people and territories. Despite the material, political, and religious difficulties, the French missionaries have remained present among local Christians for centuries, maintaining religious engagement and moral commitment to the Gulf of Siam. In the early modern period, they received direct ecclesial jurisdiction over those territories and erected institutions to support the development of Thailand and local Catholic communities. Today, they are not in charge of those dioceses but, in agreement with local bishops, they cultivate what they call a “missionary responsibility” toward this specific land and its people. A connection between Thailand and the MEP remains. The French priests contrib-

²⁹ Giuseppe Bolotta, *Belittled Citizens: The Cultural Politics of Childhood on Bangkok's Margins* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2021).

ute to local pastoral work with the desire to evangelize people of Thailand. And in many ways, this multi-secular MEP journey is rather typical of how the French missionaries have approached missionary work in Korea, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and India.³⁰ Their ways of engaging Asian people and deploying religious actions have been and remain diverse and changing, but it occurs in relation to delimited territories toward which the MEP feel historically obliged and religiously bound. People are not conceived outside the land which roots them and the soil which molds them.

Still, the MEP system cannot be reduced to local missions. The MEP system is more than the juxtaposition of missions across Asia. A sense of *terroir* is more than a local belonging. To enrich and complicate our understanding of the MEP missionary network and its Catholic economy, it is now time to look at a less typical Asian site of their presence, Hong Kong.

THE HONG KONG BASE

The MEP has been present in parts of the Chinese empire since the start. During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1644 and 1636-1912), it supported the growth of local communities and played a prominent role in Chinese Catholicism. Under the sometimes-contradictory coordination of Rome, it received ecclesial jurisdictions over several regions of the empire and oversaw their pastoral needs despite ideological tensions with other Catholic institutions established in the region (especially religious orders) and the ups and downs of anti-Christian policies.³¹

To facilitate their work and connect inland missions with the rest of world Catholicism, the MEP had a small procure in Macau, a trading port of southern China that was under Portuguese rule since 1557. A procure is a rear base that allows members of the society to gather, receive funds and goods, and send letters and reports to France and Rome. The house is usually under the supervision of one or several procurators, or financial officers, who manage the flow of goods that

30 Roux, *La croix*. Li, *Missions Étrangères de Paris*. Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*. Shanthini Pillai and Bernardo E Brown, "The Apostolic Vicariate of Western Siam and the Rise of Catholicism in Malaysia and Singapore," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2018): 45-63.

31 Li, *Missions Étrangères de Paris*.

the society circulates between places to sustain its missionary agenda. But Macao being a Portuguese territory with a Church under the Padroado system, French missionaries were never entirely at ease. Therefore, in 1840, when the British and French troops bombed China and opened new trading ports along the coast, the MEP soon crossed the Pearl River Delta and moved to Hong Kong. In this new British colony, MEP procurators could escape from the religious supervision of the Portuguese and operate more freely.

Meanwhile, the 19th century witnessed a strong revival of French Catholicism. After the uncertainties brought by the French Revolution and the challenges it raised for national identity, large segments of the French population started to turn to Catholic resources. In 1822, a group of laypeople established the *Society for the Propagation of the Faith* to pray and raise funds for missionary work.³² While France was going through rapid economic growth combined with colonial expansion, French Catholics were able to divert substantial funds to support faraway missions. Simultaneously, the number of religious vocations grew significantly. Until the mid-19th century, the MEP had been a rather small religious organization with usually less than 200 members.³³ But during the entire 19th century, missionary recruitment increased steadily and reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1895 and 1905, the MEP sent 339 missionaries to Asia, a quantity never reached before nor after that.³⁴ From a small missionary society of French diocesan priests scattered across the continent, the MEP became a network of hundreds of mission posts.

To support this expansion, Hong Kong became one of their most important rear bases. The procure oversaw a growing number of missions in mainland China as well as MEP assets and properties around Asia. Since donations coming from

32 Giancarlo Collet, "Society for the Propagation of the Faith (SPF)," in *Religion Past and Present*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

33 They were 15 MEP in 1665, 30 in 1700, 12 in 1800, but 1168 in 1900! Then, the society declined to 949 members in 1950, 614 in 1980, 363 in 2000, 248 in 2010, and 150 in 2022. By 2022, and after four and half centuries of history, the MEP have had about 4,300 members total. Source: Report of the General Superior to the 2022 General Assembly.

34 Christian Sorrel, "Le poids de l'Ouest : Remarques sur le mouvement des départs dans la Société des Missions étrangères de Paris," *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, 112 (2005): 101-14.

Catholic France remained important until World War II, the MEP bought lands and properties in various East Asian places.³⁵ Some properties were directly used by Church premises (parishes, schools, etc.). But others were rented out to generate stable revenues able to support indigenous churches and Catholic institutions. From Paris, Hong Kong, and other places, the MEP procurators were managing an important network of properties, supervising the material support of MEP missions, and administering a significant flow of wealth between Asia and Europe.

During this period, a prominent MEP procurator who had lasting influences on Hong Kong and the MEP was Fr. Léon Robert (1866-1956).³⁶ In 1888, the freshly ordained missionary was sent to Hong Kong as an assistant procurator before being assigned to Shanghai a few years later. He returned to the Frangant Harbor in 1903 with strong experience in financial management. “Since his arrival in Shanghai in 1889, he had built up a most extensive social and business network. [...] He was on the board of several well-known companies. In Hong Kong, he had had ten years to become acquainted with the movers and shakers of the Colony. He knew all the taipans, all the members of the embryonic stock exchange, all the bankers; he spoke regularly to Sir Paul Chater, and he was invited to Government House.”³⁷ His network and financial skills were such that he managed the creation of the Saint Paul Hospital, run by the sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres. In 1915, he also bought the former residence of the Hong Kong Governor to accommodate the growing activities of the MEP procure. And in 1935, he was named general superior of the MEP, overseeing the society until his retirement in 1946.

Hong Kong also became the rear base where French missionaries could come from all over Asia and recover from exhaustion and tropical diseases.³⁸ Between 1873 and 1875, the MEP erected a large sanatorium on the southern slope of the is-

35 Jeremy Clarke, *The Virgin Mary and Catholic Identities in Chinese History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013).

36 See <https://iirfa.paris/missionnaire/1806-robert-leon/>, consulted July 6 2022.

37 Alain Le Pichon, “Portrait of a practical visionary: Father Leon Robert MEP and the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres in Hong Kong 1914-19,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 52 (2012): 255-256. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23890029>.

38 Alain Le Pichon, *Béthanie & Nazareth: French Secrets from a British Colony* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, 2006).

land — Béthanie, a neo-gothic building surrounded by dairy pastures. This mix of French-inspired architecture with a quiet natural environment was not foreign to a sense of *terroir*. Well-being was cultivated through a rooted sense of space. Furthermore, shaped by the idea that manual labor was a valuable way to restore physical and spiritual health, the MEP developed Nazareth Press, a printing activity to help convalescent missionaries and their missionary work. Based on their intimate relations with specific populations of Asia, missionaries published religious books in dozens of Asian languages. Within 10 years, this printing activity became so important that in 1894, the society decided to buy a nearby building, Douglas Castle, and relocate their printing headquarters there. With the help of lay employees, Nazareth Press produced thousands of religious titles as well as dictionaries and scientific reviews in 28 Asian languages and dialects. It lasted until 1956 and gave a new literary status to several local languages and their practitioners.

Nevertheless, during all these years in Hong Kong, the MEP did not engage with local pastoral work. Since the colony was under the ecclesial supervision of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), an Italian missionary society modeled after the MEP, Hong Kong was only a rear base for French missionaries. But the rise of communism in China, as well as in broader Asia, reshuffled everything. With more Asian countries embracing Marxist theories, the MEP was forced to leave many of their missions, and in places like Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hanoi, and Pyongyang, they lost their properties. Between the 1940s and 1970s, the French priests had to gradually reinvent their economic and missionary model.

To avoid the embarrassing label of 'greedy landlord', to keep up with broader evolutions of global Catholicism, and to manifest their support for indigenous Churches, the MEP gradually handed over properties used for religious activities to local dioceses. They also sold most of their remaining for-profit properties and invested their wealth into the financial sector. Building on their network of procurators, they trained a dozen priests to become full-time financial investors and traders. Located in places like Toronto, San Francisco, Hong Kong, and Paris, this new generation of procurators devoted their time to specialized financial magazines and wealth management. In this economic chain, Hong Kong was only one link among others,

and most decisions were made in Paris and San Francisco. With no more missions in China and a declining number of vocations, maintaining large buildings in the British colony did not make sense, and the MEP gradually sold the procure (1953), Nazareth (1956), and Béthanie (1974).

Yet, during this period of intense transformations for Asian societies and the Church, Mgr. Bianchi, the Italian bishop of Hong Kong, invited a few MEP missionaries who spoke Cantonese or other Chinese languages to help minister to local populations. At first, the MEP engaged with refugees from communist China established near Béthanie. Since the whole neighborhood went under rapid urbanization, two missionaries helped create what would become the parish of Our Lady of the Rosary. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, a few more missionaries who spoke Cantonese arrived and engaged with additional pastoral activities elsewhere across Hong Kong.

Despite initial hesitation, the French missionary society was confirming its interest in keeping a foot in Hong Kong and therefore near China where they have historical ties.³⁹ Hong Kong would not be a rear base anymore but a mission. Subsequently, the society bought a building to maintain a MEP House. In addition to hosting the procure and its procurator, this house could accommodate passing-by missionaries, guests, and acquaintances. The house also allowed French MEP scattered between various parishes of the territory to gather regularly. When I was working in Hong Kong between 2003 and 2006, the group would meet at the MEP house at least once a month for a time of discussion followed by mass and the conventional *apéro* and lunch with a French flavor. Similar houses exist in places such as Bangkok, Singapore, Seoul, and Hualien, and they host comparable practices essential to the cohesion of the MEP.

To strengthen and maintain their historical link to Hong Kong, the society also started to assign young missionaries to the British colony. After three years of language training, they mostly served in local parishes with other clergy members of the Hong Kong diocese. Then, with the politico-economic reforms introduced by

³⁹ At that time, Hong Kong was a British Colony. The retrocession was decided only in the early 1980s and formalized in 1997.

Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and the gradual reopening of China, several Hong-Kong-based MEP fathers started to tour the mainland to understand its ecclesial situation on the ground, help with the training of Chinese priests and nuns, and foster communication between the Church in China and worldwide Catholicism. In the 1990s, two Hong-Kong-based missionaries even spent a few years teaching French at various Chinese universities.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the society continued to have one procurator in Hong Kong until the mid-2010s.

In 2019, MEP fathers – including three under 50-years-old – were helping with pastoral work in various districts of Hong Kong.⁴¹ Without being in charge of distinctive MEP parishes, they were joining pastoral teams of local parishes within the broader Catholic ecology of the diocese. Depending on their skills and preferences, some were more involved in youth ministry or hospital chaplaincy, while a few continued to visit China regularly. Collectively, they regularly contribute to the MEP's journal, which is produced in Paris but disseminated worldwide for free. Through short articles in French, they comment on the social, political, religious, and economic situation of the Chinese territory. Some also use social media to share weekly about their pastoral work in Hong Kong – keeping thousands of French connections in touch with Hong Kong's ecclesial situation. Finally, they take turns spending their triannual vacations in France. During their stay in Europe, most tour a variety of French ecclesial communities, schools, associations, and pilgrimage sites to share their work in the Chinese territory and promote the MEP.

In many ways, the MEP presence in Hong Kong has become more similar to what one can currently observe in Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, and other Asian countries. While the British colony has long been a MEP rear base and not a typical mission toward which the society felt obliged, it is now more in line with the way the French missionaries operate across Asia. Nonetheless, this long history suggests that the MEP cannot be reduced to a juxtaposition of local missions operating within the borders of Asian nation-states. The French missionary society does maintain

40 Michel Chambon, "Remaking the Church Catholic in Post-Maoist China The Outward Movement of Chinese Catholics and their Collaborations with the French MEP," *Mission Studies* 39, no. 3 (2022): 376-399. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341864>.

41 *Missions Etrangères de Paris*, N° 529, 551, 561, 572, 583, and 595.

regional and global structures that are not directly reducible to local missions but essential to the MEP economy. Those structures evolve over time and transcend the political transformations of Asian nations.

ROOTED IN FRANCE

This rapid overview of the MEP journey in two parts of Asia reveals the diverse and changing nature of their missionary work and network, as well as the entanglement of their economic system. Over the centuries, the French missionaries have preached the Gospel in various ways to Asian populations. Some have embraced an itinerant ministry across either China or Thailand, some have served as parish priests within a fixed territory, some have proselytized to non-Christians, and some devoted their lives to the training of Asian clergy. In other words, their religious work is neither homogeneous nor fixed.

Similarly, their way of financing their religious activities has been constantly on the move. Through the collection of encouraged donations, property management, or investment in the stock market, the MEP has diversified their financial resources and worked at making their religious institutions economically sustainable. While the MEP priests themselves embrace a very frugal lifestyle and encourage each mission to be self-sufficient, their society has learned to manage a significant amount of wealth to facilitate larger projects such as the construction of a modern hospital and a printing press. Some missionaries have even been trained to act as full-time property managers and bankers to support the broader MEP economic system.

However, in this diversity of religious engagements and financial arrangements that challenge any attempt to capture MEP's economy, one may notice that a distinct feature lies in their recruitment policy. In principle, the society enrolls only French people. Compared to most Catholic missionary organizations such as the Italian Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, American Maryknoll, and German-Dutch Society of the Divine Word that welcome vocations from various national backgrounds, the MEP has repeatedly decided to restrict their recruitment efforts to French nationals. Over the years, they have intentionally linked their religious mis-

sion to a particular national origin. Despite the low number of vocations coming from France that have threatened the very existence of the MEP, the society has maintained an exclusive relation to this nation. It is this specificity that I would like to discuss now.

As mentioned earlier, the creation of the MEP was partially an attempt to overcome the imperial influence of Spain and Portugal. In its engagement with non-European populations, the post-Tridentine Catholic Church wanted to maintain its autonomy from secular powers and cross-national empires and favored a territorialized structuration of Catholicism. In a 17th-century Europe deeply influenced by the Protestant Reformation and the Iberic crowns, the papacy looked for alternative support and invited French secular priests to generate an organization devoted to evangelization abroad. But funds were limited and volunteers were not abundant. For two centuries, the new missionary society recruited among already trained and usually ordained French-speaking clergymen, while focusing more and more exclusively on Asia. In 1850, with the revival of French Catholicism and the increased interest in distant missions, the MEP opened a seminary in Paris to train their recruits. By the beginning of the 20th century, the society reached its maximum size, about 1,400 members.⁴²

Yet, this growth spurt was short. From 1910, the number of vocations started to decline. Despite a certain recovery after each world war, the MEP had growing difficulties finding new recruits and finally decided to close their seminary. During the second half of the 20th century, and in dialogue with MEP in India where priestly vocations were numerous, they repeatedly discussed the possibility of recruiting beyond French national borders.⁴³ A few Vietnamese seminarians who had left

42 Sorrel, "Le poids de l'Ouest," 102.

43 Bernard Patary, "Vocations : Prospector ou Convaincre? : Crise du Recrutement et Dilemmes de la Propagande aux Missions Etrangères de Paris, 1930-1950," *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 102, no. 3-4 (2007): 879-914. A former General Superior, Raymond Rossignol (1928-2023), who belonged to the Indian Mission, was in favor of such change. According to my informants, Roman Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Cardinal Jozef Tomko (1985-2001), and later, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle (2019-present), also supported the idea. Thus, the General Assemblies of 1986, 1998, and 2004 discussed this possible evolution. Each time, the assembly rejected it. Yet, internal conversations and debates about this resurface constantly. For instance, in July 2020, the MEP headquarters released videos

their country during the late 1970s and embraced French citizenship were accepted within the society. In the 1980s, these new French members allowed the MEP to send a few missionaries abroad, despite quasi-nonexistent recruitment at home.

However, one must also mention that French priests interested in serving foreign churches had fewer institutional incentives to follow the path of the MEP. In 1957, Pope Pius XII promulgated *Fidei Donum*, a document inviting bishops from different parts of the world to support each other and creating the possibility for diocesan priests to go serve an alternative diocese for a limited time. Since traveling was becoming easier and ecclesial needs were constantly evolving, Rome wanted to facilitate global exchanges and mutual support between churches of different regions and continents. Subsequently, diocesan priests were authorized to ask their bishop to go minister another diocese without joining a missionary society *per se*. In this context, recruiting permanent missionaries within the MEP system was an even more difficult task.

Recruitment difficulties were not exclusive to the MEP though. Almost all Western missionary congregations, as well as religious orders and dioceses, witnessed a sharp decline in religious vocations. A decade after World War II, fewer and fewer Westerners felt called to become nuns, friars, or priests. Moreover, in a post-Vatican II Church more aware of the downsides of colonialism, even less were attracted to traditional missionary work. In this religious crisis quite specific to the West, various missionary societies decided to extend their recruitment to former mission fields where they had historical ties and where religious vocations were numerous. The MEP discussed this possibility several times during the second half of the 20th-century. Some leaders even accepted a few foreign members, such as the Vietnamese seminarians, to better demonstrate the benefit of this option. Yet, at the risk of disappearing, the MEP rejected this approach. Over the years, MEP recommitted to favoring French vocations, underlying how this link to France remains essential to their religious agenda. Still, as with many rules and principles within the MEP, this preferential option for French nationals is a guideline to follow with

in English to promote MEP vocations: "Made for More: the MEP Charism." This video was designed to attract candidates from Anglo-Saxon societies but which later generated internal debates among the MEP.

some flexibility. Exceptions are possible. For instance, members originating from Vietnam and India do exist and serve in places like Singapore and Taiwan. However, the MEP is committed to remaining a missionary society of French men. Today, the vast majority of them are French nationals.⁴⁴

For the MEP, Frenchness matters because the society perceives culture as a deep and complex web of social realities that shapes one's perception and orientation. Without engaging in highly intellectual theorization, the society believes that cultural background cannot be ignored because it informs one's life, mode of thinking, and religious journey.⁴⁵ Rooted in a particular land that materialized the lived realities of a population, its collective memory, and physical existence, culture is intuitively understood as something made out of the specific flavors and sensory experiences of a territory. While a missionary may travel and embrace a different lifestyle, his place of origin will continue to influence his perception of the world and his social positioning. Aware of this lasting effect, the MEP perceives their society as an ecclesial tool to support French missionaries in their culturally-specific needs throughout their religious journey to and with the East. As we saw with MEP houses scattered across Asia where French missionaries can occasionally gather to speak their mother tongue and eat meals with a French flavor, the society is designed to physically, emotionally, and spiritually support missionaries who are shaped by a French cultural background.

But this importance given to their cultural roots does not only impact the MEP recruitment strategies, it also shapes its assignment policy. Unlike some missionary societies, the MEP sends their missionaries to one place where they stay *Ad Vitam*, for the rest of their life. A MEP priest is not reassigned to a new country every six or ten years. When one is recruited, he is sent to an Asian country where he will minister for the rest of his life. To emphasize the radicality of this transfer, the society has developed several rituals during the diaconal ordination and before departure

44 In July 2022, the MEP counted 150 missionary priests. They also had 19 seminarians, all but 2 being French citizens. Meanwhile, the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), which can be considered an Italian version of the MEP, counted 392 missionary priests. And among their 99 seminarians, none of them was Italian.

45 See documents produced and circulated before and after General Assemblies of the MEP during the 1970s-1990s.

from France to solemnize this *Ad Vitam* assignment to one specific country. Mission is displayed as a once-in-a-lifetime transplantation of a French diocesan priest to another culture and society.

Of course, this lifetime assignment to one country can be understood as a pragmatic choice. Mastering a local language requires years of investment. However, many missionary societies do not make this choice. Their missionaries do not stay *Ad Vitam* within a local Church. They go, propagate the Catholic faith in whatever way they can, and move on to their next assignment. For the MEP, the logic is different. A missionary priest is not an interchangeable and standardized unit that can be moved across numerous countries. Fundamentally, he is a human made of a specific culture who needs time and commitment to not only tame his own cultural preconceptions but also deeply engage with the population he is sent to. Upon his arrival on a mission, he spends three full years learning the local language and customs before undertaking any pastoral role. During this process, he will be helped to adopt the lifestyle of the people he is called to journey with. He will typically live among local priests, sometimes within a family, to better integrate into their history, cuisine, and modes of thinking. After this initial training, he will typically remain in the same country for the rest of his life and work within local Catholic institutions.

Still, French missionaries are not merely called to merge into their country of adoption and forget their origin. For the MEP idea of *terroir*, this would be unrealistic. MEP priests are still affiliated with an ecclesial institution that stands beyond their Asian diocese of mission. In addition to their efforts to belong to an Asian culture, the MEP system also institutionalizes a distance between a missionary and his diocese of adoption. As we saw at the MEP houses, French priests meet regularly to share (in French) not only insights, concerns, and advice, but also *apéro* and meals with a French flavor. If the MEP do not typically live together like members of a religious order, they still gather to support each other and cultivate their link to their missionary society and France.

Furthermore, as we saw with Fathers Dupont and Blanc resting in Hong Kong, MEP priests take vacations out of their mission. And it is expected that they re-

turn to France. Every three years, they go back for three months. During this time in his home country, a MEP missionary will typically spend about a month visiting his relatives. The rest of the time, he will be between the luxurious MEP headquarters, a 24,000 square meter property with a large French-style garden in the historical heart of Paris, to connect with colleagues, and the rest of France to tour and present his country of adoption to French Catholic communities.⁴⁶ Through these circulations, the MEP system works to cultivate a double-direction bridge between France and specific places in Asia. They want to be rooted on both sides. It is not only Asian dioceses that receive a MEP priest, but also French Catholic communities who hear from Asian localities.

For the MEP, cultivating a subtle relationship to France is essential. They approach it not only as a pragmatic strategy to recruit new members but also as a religious duty to cultivate oneself and evangelize the French people. On the one hand, spending time in France helps to cultivate the roots and well-being of a missionary. Nourishing the soul of a French Catholic takes a certain amount of cheese, bread, and wine. On the other hand, their visits to their home country help French churchgoers deepen their understanding of the vitality, challenges, and specificities of Asian Catholics. Ideally, these visits strengthen the faith of French Catholics. It is the MEP missionaries' way to contribute to the Church in France and to keep alive their relationship to their home country and the evolutions of its Church and society.

Through the MEP system, a missionary has a foot in Asia and a toe in France. But through this cultivated and regulated tension between two places of belonging, the MEP expresses how local cultures, both in the West and in Asia, are factors that need time to be cautiously disciplined and seriously considered when one seeks to evangelize oneself and others. Grounded in the belief that different cultural back-

46 On September 15, 2023, French journalist investigator Laetitia ChereI published a report "Des Prêtres Français Soupçonnés d'Aggressions Sexuelles en Thaïlande" discussing sex scandals among the MEP. In this article, real estate agents and expert Dominique Goussot assessed the value of the MEP headquarters at something between 500 million and 1.5 billion euros. Furthermore, retired MEP François Gouriou who was in charge of the finance of the society between 1998 and 2008 explained that, in the early 2000s, there was not a square meter of the property that has not been entirely refurbished. See: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/religion/pedophilie-de-l-eglise/enquete-des-pretres-missionnaires-francais-soupconnes-d-agressions-sexuelles-en-thaïlande_6062436.html.

grounds shape each side of a missionary journey, the MEP devotes considerable human and economic resources to engage themselves and the Asian populations.

CATHOLIC ECONOMY

In 1659, when the Holy See gave instructions for the creation of the MEP, the Roman authority spelled out the way in which they thought that the Catholic faith should be brought to non-Christian societies.

“Do not act with zeal, do not put forward any arguments to convince these peoples to change their rites, their customs or their usages, except if they are evidently contrary to the religion and morality. What would be more absurd than to bring France, Spain, Italy or any other European country to the Chinese? Do not bring to them our countries, but instead bring to them the faith, a faith that does not reject or hurt the rites, nor the usages of any people, provided that these are not distasteful, but that instead keeps and protects them.”⁴⁷

Over the centuries, the MEP has built upon its cultural roots to fulfill this mission. I argue that the notion of *terroir*, the sense of place, has gradually become a key resource to share MEP’s Catholic faith with the Asian population. Today, the Catholic economy of the MEP is not only rooted in theological discourses as deployed, for instance, through the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Catholic Reformation, and Vatican II (1962-1965) but also in the unspoken French cultural environment and its territorializing taste of place. “Instead of considering itself a melting pot where flavors come together to add a seamless dimension to the ‘plate’ as a whole, France has historically found its unifying aspect in its diversity, characterized by starkly different, sometimes contrasting regional ingredients. The French consciousness of this diversity manifests itself not only in material food culture, but also in reflections on language, literature, and philosophy, reminding people of who they are (or who they think they are) on a daily basis.”⁴⁸ In France, but also for the MEP, *terroir*

47 Instructions given in 1659 by the *Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith* to François Pallu and Pierre Lambert de la Motte.

48 Parker, *Tasting French Terroir*, 2.

builds a culture of inclusion, recognizes differences, and is a resource to overcome geographical diversity and cultural tensions.

As the Roman statement suggests, segments of world Catholicism have long been aware of the difficult discernment deep-seated in missionary work. For centuries, the globalization of Catholicism has been the site of constant negotiations to manage cultural and socio-political conflicts. As these processes continue to unfold themselves today, scholars debate the cultural and theological theories through which the Latin Catholic faith is translated and adapted into different localities. Often revolving around the notions of contextualization, inculturation, and globalization, these scholarly conversations primarily focus on the way faith is adjusted to and expressed through different cultural contexts.⁴⁹

Our investigation of the MEP economy, however, suggests that the religious transfers that the French priests foster are not only happening in relation to their destination. They intentionally keep their own cultural background in the picture. Rooted in a French taste of place, MEP's efforts to adapt the Catholic faith to the lived realities of a particular Asian population are informed both by Asian and French considerations. Through different means, they cultivate roots on both sides. Through this particular Catholic economy, the materially-situated cultural background of a missionary is not simply perceived as an obstacle to overcome but also as a lever.

In other words, for the MEP, the Catholic faith is not a floating set of beliefs mastered by religious experts, nor a spirituality separated from the tangible world. As a society, they do not really believe in other-worldly religious communities. For this society of secular priests informed by French cultural roots, the *Secula Christi* (fellowship with Christ) becomes concrete and real when it sprouts within the particular flavors, historicity, materiality, and complexity of a place. Like Adam is taken from the soil, the Catholic faith relies on and grows from a piece of land. A

49 Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity* (Rome: Centre "Cultures and Religions" - Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982). Albert Monshan Wu, *From Christ to Confucius: German Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and the Globalization of Christianity, 1860-1950*. (Cumberland: Yale University Press, 2016).

Christian mission is not the mere establishment of a pious group of people alone. In the MEP's eyes, it is the multifaceted engagement with the concrete socio-economic realities of a place. And this engagement cannot truly occur if the cultural background of the missionary is not accurately recognized.

Consequently, the peas served at Hong Kong's procure was not simply a culinary concession nor a short parenthesis within a challenging missionary process of deep cultural immersion among Asian Christians. Rather, it was a fraternal reminder, an intentional warning, and a memorable compass about the particular French culture that is still shaping the missionary while allowing him to journey with people from different backgrounds. The peas, like the *vol-au-vent* and *apéro*, acted as a reminder of this original link to France; a relation that needs to be properly acknowledged and managed to cultivate another relation, the one to the country of mission. Within the MEP economy, the two come together and a small pea can facilitate their religious dialogue and fruitful coexistence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altic, Mirela. "Geographical Knowledge as Power: The Role of the Society of Jesus and the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris in the Early Exploration of Louisiana." *Terrae Incognitae* 54, no. 1 (2016): 5–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00822884.2022.2046944>.

Azevedo, Marcello de Carvalho. *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity*. Rome: Centre «Cultures and Religions» - Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982.

Beillevaire, Patrick. "La participation de la Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris à l'ouverture intellectuelle du Japon dans les derniers temps du régime shôgunal." *Histoire & Missions Chrétiennes* 7, no. 3 (2008): 79–105. DOI: 10.3917/hmc.007.0079.

Bolotta, Giuseppe. *Belittled Citizens: The Cultural Politics of Childhood on Bangkok's Margins*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2021.

Chambon, Michel. *Making Christ Present in China: Actor-Network Theory and the*

Anthropology of Christianity. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

----. "Remaking the Church Catholic in Post-Maoist China The Outward Movement of Chinese Catholics and their Collaborations with the French MEP" *Mission Studies* 39, no. 3 (2022): 376–399. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341864>.

Clarke, Jeremy. *The Virgin Mary and Catholic Identities in Chinese History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013.

Collet, Giancarlo. "Society for the Propagation of the Faith (SPF)." In *Religion Past and Present*, edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_SIM_024357.

DeBernardi, Jean Elizabeth. *Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819–2000*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2020.

Demossier, Marion. "Beyond Terroir: Territorial Construction, Hegemonic Discourses, and French Wine Culture." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 4 (2011): 685–705. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41350750>.

Fauconnet-Buzelin, Françoise. *Un Evêque au Pays des Talapoins. Louis Laneau, Premier Vicaire Apostolique du Siam 1637–1696*. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2021.

----. "Réforme Romaine et Esprit français. La Société Des Missions Étrangères de Paris." *Revue Des Sciences Religieuses* 80, no. 2 (2006): 167–78. <https://doi.org/10.4000/rsr.1872>.

Finch, Andrew. "A Necessary and Fruitful Labour: The Société Des Missions Etrangères de Paris and the Formation of a Native Clergy in Korea, c.1836–66." *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 81, no. 212 (2008): 280–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2007.00438.x>.

Galipeau, Brendan A. "Tibetan Wine Production, Taste of Place, and Regional Niche Identities in Shangri-La, China." In *Trans-Himalayan Borderlands: Livelihoods, Territorialities, Modernities*, edited by Dan Smyer Yü and Jean Mi-



chaud, 207-228. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048531714-011>.

Guennou, Jean. *Missions Étrangères de Paris*. Paris: Fayard Le Sarment, 1986.

Keith, Charles. *Catholic Vietnam a Church from Empire to Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Laneau, Louis. *De deificatione justorum per Jesum Christum*. Hong Kong: Typis Societatis Missionum ad Exteros, 1887.

Le Pichon, Alain. *Béthanie & Nazareth: French Secrets from a British Colony*. Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, 2006.

----. "Portrait of a practical visionary: Father Leon Robert MEP and the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres in Hong Kong 1914-19." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 52 (2012): 225–266. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23890029>.

Legrand, Hervé. "Société Des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP)." In *Religion Past and Present*, edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel. Leiden: Brill, 2011. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-5888_rpp_SIM_124882.

Li, Ji. *Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) and China from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Boston: Brill, 2021.

Makino, Motonori. "The Missionary Work of the Société Des Missions Étrangères de Paris and Its Catechists in Vietnam." *Southeast Asia: History and Culture* 35 (2006): 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.5512/sea.2006.3>.

Marin, Catherine, ed. *La Société des Missions étrangères de Paris, 350 ans à la rencontre de l'Asie 1658-2008*. Paris: Karthala, 2010.

Michaud, Jean. "Missionary Ethnographers in Upper-Tonkin: The Early Years, 1895-1920." *Asian Ethnicity* 5, no. 2 (2010): 179–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1463136042000221876>.

Menegon, Eugenio. *Ancestors, Virgins, & Friars Christianity as a Local Religion in*

Late Imperial China. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Parker, Thomas. *Tasting French Terroir*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

Patary, Bernard. “Vocations : Prospector ou Convaincre ? : Crise du Recrutement et Dilemmes de la Propagande aux Missions Etrangères de Paris, 1930-1950.” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* 102 no. 3-4 (2007): 879–914. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.RHE.3.159>.

Pillai, Shanthini. “The Synekism of Catholic Faith and Citizenship in Peninsular Malaysia.” *Social Sciences and Missions* 34, no. 3-4 (2021): 335–65. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748945-bja10043>.

Pillai, Shanthini, and Bernardo E Brown. “The Apostolic Vicariate of Western Siam and the Rise of Catholicism in Malaysia and Singapore.” *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2018): 45–63. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25424246-00101004>.

Rerceretnam, Marc Sebastian. *A History of Immigrant Roman Catholics and Converts in Early Singapore 1832–1945*. Singapore: M.S. Rerceretnam, 2021.

Roux, Pierre-Emmanuel. *La croix, la baleine et le canon: la France face à la Corée au milieu du XIXe siècle*. Paris: Cerf, 2012.

Sorrel, Christian. “Le poids de l’Ouest : Remarques sur le mouvement des départs dans la Société des Missions étrangères de Paris.” *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest*. 2, no. 112 (2005): 101–14. <https://doi.org/10.4000/abpo.1095>.

Stackhouse, Max L. *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.

Strate, Shane. “An Uncivil State of Affairs: Fascism and Anti-Catholicism in Thailand, 1940–1944.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2008): 59–87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23020303>.

Trubek, Amy B. *The Taste of Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.



- Ulin, Robert C. *Vintages and Traditions: An Ethnohistory of Southwest French Wine Cooperatives*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.
- . "Work as Cultural Production: Labour and Self-identity among Southwest French Wine-growers." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8, no. 4 (2002): 691-712. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3134939>.
- Van Grasdorff, Gilles. *La Belle Histoire des Missions Etrangères 1658-2008*. Paris: Perrin, 2007.
- Wu, Albert Monshan. *From Christ to Confucius: German Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and the Globalization of Christianity, 1860-1950*. Cumberland: Yale University Press, 2016.
- Young, Ernest P. *Ecclesiastical Colony: China's Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.