

George Barry O'Toole:

An Inculturated View of Formation and Transmission of Belief in the Founding of

Fu Jen University

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One-hundred years ago, Benedictines from Saint Vincent Archabbey founded Fu Jen University (more commonly referred to as Peking University at the time) in Beijing. Their efforts were, in many ways, led by a diocesan priest and Benedictine oblate named George Barry O'Toole.¹ Top of his class at the Pontifical Urban University (a school in Rome for the training of priest-missionaries), O'Toole hailed from Toledo, Ohio, but found his way to Saint Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. While there, he managed to convince the prefect of the seminary at the time, Aurelius Stehle, OSB, that, if Stehle were ever elected archabbot of Saint Vincent, he should commit Saint Vincent to a mission in China. Lo and behold, in 1918, Stehle was elected archabbot. In July of 1920, he granted O'Toole permission to explore the feasibility of a mission to China. By 1925, Fu Jen University was officially open.²

An examination of O'Toole's work in China can help underscore the unique ways that Fu Jen ensured an inculturated view of formation and transmission of belief in its founding. While it is a theological neologism that predates the founding of Fu Jen, by "inculturation" I refer to attempts to translate the Gospel within various cultures in a way that respects both the integrity

¹ This presentation is a shortened version of a presentation I delivered for the hundredth anniversary celebration of Fu Jen held at Saint Vincent on April 4, 2025. The full essay will be published in proceedings of the conference next year.

² For a full history of the founding of Fu Jen, see Jerome Oetgen, *Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey, The First Benedictine Monastery in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000),

of local culture and the integrity of the Gospel, to the mutual enrichment of each.³ O'Toole's work at Fu Jen shows how, from an early stage, Fu Jen would anticipate later, more developed theologies of inculturation in its own work of formation and the transmission of belief. It is an effort that, as many of you know much better than me, continues to guide the mission of Fu Jen in its present form. Surveying the diligent efforts of O'Toole one-hundred years ago can thus continue to reinspire the efforts of Fu Jen today.

O'Toole and Fu Jen's Educational Mission

George Barry O'Toole's leading role in the founding of Fu Jen accounts for the central role that he played in developing the distinctive educational mission of Fu Jen. In his study of the University, Liu Xian extols its "farsighted vision of the Catholic Church interacting with Chinese society," the way in which the University was established on "a foundation of respect for local culture."⁴ That vision largely originated with O'Toole. Working during a time marked by a disdain for Western imperialism and a swell of Chinese nationalism, O'Toole positioned Fu Jen

³ The word "inculturation" first appeared in a Vatican document in 1979 (see *Catechesi tradendae*, no. 53). As John Paul II explained the term in his 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, inculturation "not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation 'means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.' The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church's reflection and practice. But at the same time it is a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith. Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission" (no. 52).

⁴ Liu Xian, "Two Universities and Two Eras of Catholicism in China: Fu Jen University and Aurora University, 1903–1937," *Christian Higher Education* 8, no. 5 (2009): 405-21, at 410, 419. See also Xiaoxin Wu, "A Case Study of the Catholic University of Peking During the Benedictine Period (1927-1933)" (Ed.D. diss., University of San Francisco, 1993), 127, 149.

in a way that allowed it to spread the Gospel while also preserving Chinese culture. It was a cutting-edge, even progressive, educational vision for the time and place. It was something like inculturation.

That vision owed much from a meeting that awaited O'Toole as he embarked on his great enterprise in 1920. On October 18 of that year, O'Toole met Vincent Ying, a leading Chinese Catholic layman who since 1912 urged for the establishment of a Catholic University in China.⁵ Famously, in a 1912 letter to Pope Pius X, Ying had deplored the dilapidated state of Catholic education in China and called for the establishment of a Catholic university that would teach Chinese Catholics and train culturally informed native clergy.⁶ In that October meeting, Ying showed O'Toole that letter, and it had a tremendous effect on the young missionary from Saint Vincent.

The next month, O'Toole handwrote a twenty-four-page letter to Archabbot Aurelius, shortly after Archabbot Leander's death. It reads as nothing less than a manifesto, and the influence of Ying suffuses its pages. There, O'Toole reported that he found "conditions here truly deplorable especially from the standpoint of education." He lamented that "Catholicity is a byword for obscurantism in the Celestial Empire." And he blamed the French. "In fact," observed O'Toole, "so thoroughly *Gallicanized* is the Catholic Religion in China that 'French Jesus Christ' is the term used among the people to designate the Catholic Church while by 'English Jesus Christ' they understand Protestantism." In siding with French colonial interests in China, the French Catholic missionary "is cursed by an excessive *chauvinism*" in a way that makes "the Catholic Church positively hateful to those Chinese who are sufficiently educated to

⁵ See Donald Paragon, "Ying Lien-chih (1866-1926) and the Rise of Fu Jen, The Catholic University of Peking," *Monumenta Serica* 20 (1961): 165-225, at 207. See also the contribution of Chen Fang-Chung to this volume.

⁶ The full text of this letter can be found in Paragon, "Ying Lien-chih (1866-1926) and the Rise of Fu Jen," 215-18.

know the history and politics of their country.”⁷ A few months later, O’Toole would decry how “French missionaries in their fanatical chauvinism prostitute their mission-work for French propaganda.”⁸ While Saint Vincent monks in China bemoaned such “anti-French” sentiment from O’Toole,⁹ recent scholarship has borne out O’Toole’s indictments. Ernest Young’s 2013 book, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, details the lethal commiseration of French missionary activity with colonial interests. What came to be known as the French Protectorate employed “French diplomacy and French arms” to stunt the development of a truly Chinese Catholicism, provoking the resentment of people like Ying and, through Ying, O’Toole.¹⁰ In those unfortunate circumstances O’Toole recognized—and seized—an opportunity.

Specifically, to avoid these imperialistic pitfalls, Fu Jen University aimed to foster an authentically Chinese Catholicism. An interesting 1926 exchange within the pages of *America Magazine* displays O’Toole’s part in formulating that mission. In March of that year, the Jesuit periodical featured an article by a Catholic Chinese layman named Peter Yang. Yang began his article by lamenting the hypocrisy, lack of schools, and focus on the illiterate that characterized the Catholic Chinese missions. He in turn called upon American Catholics to remedy the situation.¹¹ The next month, O’Toole—from Fu Jen—replied. Concurring with Yang’s criticism of the missions, he used this exchange as an opportunity to showcase Saint Vincent’s own efforts. For O’Toole, “Only when the beauty of Christianity has been expressed in terms of their own language and culture, only when its apostles come to them clothed in that intellectual prestige

⁷ ASVA: O’Toole to Stehle, November 14, 1920.

⁸ ASVA: O’Toole to Stehle, January 6, 1921.

⁹ See e.g., ASVA: Placidus Rattenberger to Victor Lillig, October 21, 1924.

¹⁰ Ernest P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China’s Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33. See also D.E. Mungello, *The Catholic Invasion of China: Remaking Chinese Catholicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

¹¹ Peter Yang, “Christianity in China,” *America Magazine* 34, no. 21 (March 6, 1926): 493-95, at 494-95.

which they supremely venerate, can we look for the conversion of the Chinese people.”¹² In this regard, and this is also true in his letters,¹³ he commended the example of Matteo Ricci: that sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary who, in immersing himself so thoroughly (and somewhat controversially) in Chinese culture, gained the respect of Chinese intellectuals.¹⁴ O’Toole went on to situate his efforts at Fu Jen in this Riccian tradition. The Benedictines in China “will spare no pains to hasten the day on which the University will become an indigenous institution, and they will do everything in their power to make the Church as Chinese in China as it is English in England, Italian in Italy, or American in America. They will welcome the day when Catholicism shall cease to be an exotic plant in Chinese soil.”¹⁵ Anchored in the convictions of O’Toole, Fu Jen would offer an evangelical alternative to imperialistic ambition.

Moreover, O’Toole suggested that the Benedictines were uniquely equipped for this mission. In his *America* article, he hailed the “local, as opposed to international” organization of the Order of St. Benedict as vital to these efforts at making the Church as Chinese in China as it is English in England.¹⁶ One is reminded here of Boniface Wimmer, founder of Saint Vincent, and his own appeal to Benedictine stability—and the way in which it familiarized a monastic community with the surrounding area and its spiritual needs—as he tried to justify his own missionary efforts in America.¹⁷ O’Toole relayed this Benedictine heritage at length in a 1926

¹² George Barry O’Toole, “The Catholic University of Pekin,” *America Magazine* 34, no. 26 (April 10, 1926): 610-11, at 610.

¹³ See, e.g., ASVA: O’Toole to Stehle, November 14, 1920.

¹⁴ For a history of Ricci and the “Chinese Rites Controversy” that he helped provoke, see Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 118-54. In 2022, Pope Francis recognized Ricci as “venerable,” thus putting him on the road toward beatification and canonization.

¹⁵ O’Toole, “The Catholic University of Pekin,” 611.

¹⁶ O’Toole, “The Catholic University of Pekin,” 611.

¹⁷ See Boniface Wimmer, “Concerning the Missions,” in *Boniface Wimmer: Letters of an American Abbot*, ed. Jerome Oetgen (Latrobe, PA: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 2008), 19: “That this success [of Benedictine missionaries] must be ascribed to the fact that the Benedictines are men of stability; they are not wandering monks; they acquire lands and bring them under cultivation; they become thoroughly affiliated to the country and people to which they belong, and they receive their recruits from the district in which they have established themselves.”

article entitled “The Spiritual Lineage of the Catholic University of Peking,” which he published in the first *Bulletin* of the University.¹⁸ As O’Toole narrated it, that lineage spanned the long history of Benedictine missionaries, including Wimmer himself. Through those historical efforts, as evidenced most clearly in the Middle Ages, Benedictines had preserved the best of civilization. In O’Toole’s eyes, Fu Jen was but the most recent instantiation of that mission. Regretting that “no conservative force” currently exists to safeguard Chinese culture, O’Toole summoned his readers to “[p]ray, then, that the zeal and energy of the American Benedictines may not fail, and that in God’s good time, they may renew in the East the former glories of the Monks of the West, becoming the builders of New China even as the monks of a thousand years ago were the builders of modern Europe.”¹⁹ It was precisely the Benedictine character of Fu Jen that allowed it to build upon rather than replace the riches of Chinese learning.

O’Toole reinforced these words with deeds. As the school’s rector, he ensured that the curriculum of Fu Jen emphasized Chinese studies, directed building projects on campus in Chinese architectural style, and even allowed the graduation garbs of Fu Jen students to reflect traditional Chinese culture. He recruited Chinese natives like Ying to the Fu Jen faculty “so that the Chinese people may see that the Catholic Church is not a foe, but a friend to their language, their national traditions, and their classic literature.”²⁰ In his research at the time, O’Toole tried to unearth the long, venerable tradition of Catholicism in China and so prove that it was not some exotic plant on foreign soil.²¹ He led efforts at Fu Jen to publish classics of Chinese Christian

¹⁸ George Barry O’Toole, “The Spiritual Lineage of the Catholic University of Peking,” *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* 1 (September 1926): 17-22. O’Toole himself helped found and fundraise this journal.

¹⁹ O’Toole, “The Spiritual Lineage of the Catholic University of Peking,” 19, 22.

²⁰ ASVA: O’Toole to Vincent Ying, March 6, 1924.

²¹ See George Barry O’Toole, “Random Notes on Early Christianity in China,” *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* 1 (September 1926): 31-39. That work continued even after his time at Fu Jen; see, e.g., idem., “Chinese Philosophers of the Eastern Chou (770-249 B.C.),” *New Scholasticism* 13, no. 3 (1939): 169-81.

literature and translate biblical and devotional texts into Chinese.²² In 1931, O'Toole himself cowrote a joint Chinese-English logic textbook with Ying's son, the first book of its kind and one that required O'Toole to attend to the always difficult process of cross-cultural translation.²³ Finally, as a leader in the Benedictine community in China, he even petitioned Archabbot Aurelius to permit the monks to wear white habits that were more suitable to the Chinese summer.²⁴ O'Toole immersed himself in every facet of China in order to learn from it and, at the same time, to enhance the institutional mission of Fu Jen.

All these efforts proved costly, however, and led to the subsequent demise of Saint Vincent's involvement at Fu Jen. Tensions grew between O'Toole and the monks staffing Fu Jen over jurisdiction and, ultimately, over money.²⁵ Monks—and, quietly, the archabbot—worried increasingly about the exorbitant costs of their efforts. Devoted as he was to the project, O'Toole dismissed these concerns as “belly-aching,” suggesting that “the only result of crabbing is to earn the undesirable reputation of being cheap-skates.”²⁶ What alarmed O'Toole was the health of Archabbot Aurelius, his backer ever since their days together at Saint Vincent Seminary. Toward the end of 1926, after learning of the Archabbot's recent health struggles, O'Toole tendered him some health advice and concluded with a warning: “If you neglect this advice, then I know that before long you will be in the next world and I shall be left alone and powerless amid the ruins of what might have been a glorious achievement.”²⁷ That would prove to be a prescient remark.

²² Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 297.

²³ George Barry O'Toole and Quianli Ying, *Logic: A Bilingual Text* (Beijing, 1931). For an overview of this project and an exposition of its evangelical purpose, see Francis Clougherty, “The Publications of the Catholic University of Peking,” *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* 6 (July 1929): 67-92, at 77-79.

²⁴ “P.S. Do not forget to get us permission for white habits in summer. The summer sun is villainous in China, and one sun-stroke means the end of a man's usefulness in China. Speedy action is desirable in this matter. Some of us will have to stick out the whole summer in Peking” (ASVA: O'Toole to Stehle, March 29, 1925).

²⁵ For an overview of this discord, see Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 336-49.

²⁶ ASVA: O'Toole to Stehle, June 15, 1925.

²⁷ ASVA: O'Toole to Stehle, November 6, 1926.

Four years later, Archabbot Aurelius died, and O'Toole was left without a vital advocate. The new archabbot, Alfred Koch, did not share his predecessor's enthusiasm for the project. The Great Depression hit, and Saint Vincent found itself drowning in debt from its China expenditures. By this point, as Oetgen puts it diplomatically, "O'Toole's affiliation as an oblate with the Benedictine community had become increasingly tenuous."²⁸ As monks of Saint Vincent started to perform the post-mortem of their involvement in China during this anxious time, many blamed O'Toole; thus, Father Felix Fellner (prior of Saint Vincent) wrote to Father Ildephonse Brandstetter (prior of Fu Jen): "[t]he mistake... was undoubtedly that the desire of having a grand institution outgrew the ability of St. Vincent, to furnish the men and the means, and the other houses were too indifferent, because the whole work seemed too much a hobby of Dr. O'Toole, who influenced Archabbot Aurelius."²⁹ Much to the devastation of O'Toole and despite his best efforts, Saint Vincent had no choice but to withdraw from Fu Jen in the summer of 1933.

Conclusion

Fortunately, while Fu Jen University would experience great tumult in China after the Benedictines withdrew, it would eventually find stability after its reestablishment in Taiwan in 1961. Its tremendous success today shows that the missionary efforts of Saint Vincent—like O'Toole—were not in vain. While I am an outsider, I would tender that it has been precisely because of its ability to integrate its Catholic mission with its East Asian context that has allowed Fu Jen to flourish in the ways that it has. In a way that would make O'Toole proud, it witnesses to an inculturated view of formation and transmission of belief in the twenty-first century.

²⁸ Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 342.

²⁹ ASVA: Felix Fellner to Ildephonse Brandstetter, August 8, 1933. Father Oswald Baker, O.S.B., shared a similar sentiment the following year to Fellner: "Doctor O'Toole, you know, had been put in complete and exclusive charge. It was his University and we should not have followed him, for no other Abbey did" (ASVA: Oswald Baker to Felix Fellner, November 12, 1934).

As Saint Vincent celebrated the hundredth anniversary of Fu Jen's founding in April, Pope Francis gave voice to this legacy. In his message to the gathering, Francis singled out how those at the university were "able to integrate numerous elements from the local culture into their model of education, thus making the newly-found university a genuinely Chinese institution" and fostering an "innovative symbiosis between the cultural, educational and academic traditions of East and West."³⁰ As this paper has shown, that achievement in large part stemmed from the labors of O'Toole. Identifying this mission as "far-sighted," the pope presented Fu Jen as an example for today. For the pope, in a paradoxical world increasingly interconnected and fragmented, Catholic schools are all the more "called to spread a lexicon of dialogue built upon respect for others, appreciation of cultural and religious diversity, and sincere commitment to the advancement of justice, peace and universal fraternity." As an indefatigable witness to this paschal lexicon of dialogue, the truth driving O'Toole's work in China does indeed continue to live in a lasting way.³¹ Thank you to those of you at Fu Jen for that work.

³⁰ The full text of that letter can be found in this volume.

³¹ I would like to thank Catherine Petrany, Bill Portier, Jerome Oetgen, and Brother Nicholas Koss for their assistance in improving this article.