

The Church of the Saviour (西什庫天主堂), Beijing

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Vault of the Church of the Saviour

The Church of the Saviour (西什庫天主堂) in Beijing is a witness to the difficult relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Chinese State, despite the former's many contributions to science and establishment of eleemosynary institutions in the latter.

The first visit to China by a Catholic missionary was in response to repeated invitation by the Yuan emperor, Kublai Khan 忽必烈, who ruled confidently at the height of the empire.¹

The first church in the capital (then called Khanbaliq 汗八里) was built soon thereafter, in 1299; the first Archbishop of Beijing was appointed in 1307. But collapse of the dynasty ended that effort.

¹ Kublai Khan sent two emissaries, both of whom met the Pope. Very detailed first hand account of the second by Rabban Bar Sauma: *The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China : medieval travels from China through Central Asia to Persia and beyond* translated by E. A. Wallis Budge (1996).

Matteo Ricci arrived three centuries later during the late Ming Dynasty. His indigenization and accommodation approach was immensely successful, helped also by missionaries bringing modern science to China.

His legacy survived dynastic change, and Catholics were welcomed and protected by the Qing Emperor Kangxi (康熙) at the height of the empire. When missionaries cured his malaria in 1693 while court physicians and traditional medicines failed, Kangxi gifted land and funds for a church, the predecessor of the Church of the Saviour.²

But all that came to naught after the Rites Controversy (禮儀之爭), due partly to internecine struggles. The Catholics were expelled; I wrote a modern coda to that fiasco.³

With the decline of the Qing dynasty, a difficult period of perceived grievances followed, with episodic calamity. During the Cultural Revolution, the Church was confiscated and turned into an electronics factory; I attended many meetings there in the aftermath.

The physical church has been restored, and is now a declared monument, but historical problems persist, not yet resolved by Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 letter to the flock. RIP

² Very detailed first hand account of the incident by French missionaries: *Lettres Édifiantes Et Curieuses, Vol. 7: Écrites des Missions Étrangères, par Quelques Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jesus* (1708), pp217ff.

³ [Bishop Ronald Hall: Quiet Moments – an Encounter with Confucius 何明華主教：靜祈籌動 – 與孔子邂逅 \(2012\).](#)