

# Tibetan Catholics

*by Alphonse Savioz, CR*

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The history of the various attempts to open Catholic missions in western Tibet and Lhasa in the 17th and 18th centuries has been treated by others. I concern myself here with the Catholics of eastern Tibet only, and of the situation of the church among these Tibetan peoples today.

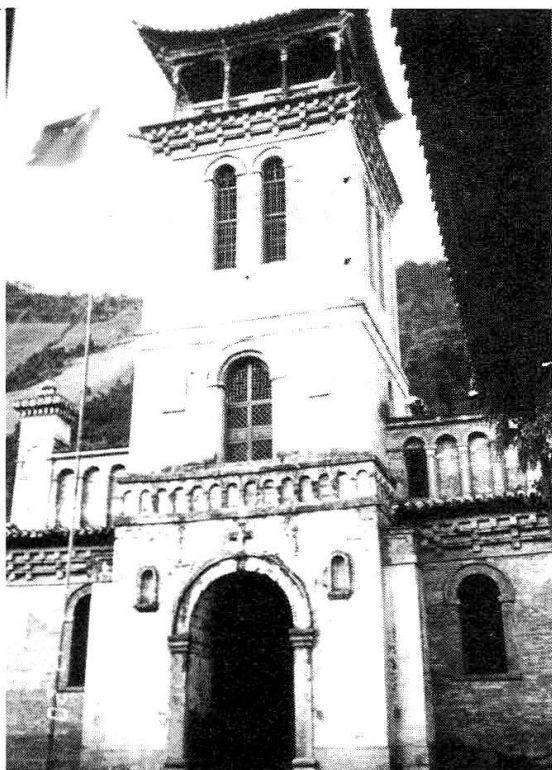


A young man ready to help with the re-building of the Church in Tsedjrong.

From 1860 until the 1950's the Catholic Church has maintained a presence in the realm of the Dalai Lama. At least one Catholic community still exists there today in what is known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region. This is the Yanjing Catholic Church in Mangkang County, which is situated near the border of Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces. The Catholic church built there nearly 100 years ago was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It was rebuilt in recent years and consecrated on December 24, 1988. This new church is now the pride, not only of the 600 Catholics of the area, but also of Buddhists who contributed to its restoration and participated in its inauguration (cf. "Catholic Church Reopened in Tibet," Hong Kong Sunday Examiner, 25.8.89).



Christians gathered in the yard outside the church.



The Catholic Church of Tsedjrong.

Besides the Catholics in Tibet itself there are also over 4,000 ethnic Tibetan Catholics living outside of Tibet, in the northwest corner of Yunnan Province. More than half of these live along the Mekong River in the Autonomous Tibetan Prefecture of Diqing. The others live in the Salween Valley along the Nujiang River. A significant number of them, however, belong to the Nu tribe, an ethnic minority akin to the Tibetans who speak the Tibetan language. Since their own dialect is undeveloped, they choose to pray and sing in Tibetan.

All the places near the Tibetan Border on Yunnan's northwestern tip, along the Salween, Mekong and upper Yangtze valleys, despite belonging to different provinces, were formerly part of the "Mission of Tibet" and later of the Kangding dio-

cese. Paris Foreign Mission Society priests worked there for many years. In 1930 they were joined by the Swiss Fathers of Mount Grand St. Bernard who built a hospice on a high pass between the Mekong and Salween valleys. When all the foreign missionaries were expelled in 1952, only an old Chinese priest remained behind to take care of the Catholics. He himself died five years later. Today Father Shi Guangrong, a Tibetan-speaking native of the Mekong Valley who was ordained in Shanghai in 1987, is in charge of the Catholic communities there.

Besides the Tibetan Catholics in Yunnan Province, there are also small groups of Tibetan Catholics in Sichuan Province. The Catholic community in the neighborhood of Kangding which I had the opportunity to visit in 1987 numbers more than 200. Small numbers of Catholics are also scattered in the area north of Kangding, near the old city of Batang. I was unable to meet any of these Catholics during my 1987 visit, but Father Shi Guangrong visited them in 1989. There are also some Tibetan Catholics in Qinghai Province and among the refugees living outside of China.



The Catholic community in front of their new church in the Village of Kionatong, at the border of Burma and Tibet in the Salween Valley.