In the 1990s, Chinese society witnessed further efforts to promote the Catholic Church. On the societal level, there were more opportunities for church members to take initiative, make a difference, and engage in exchanges. A reviewer, Arne Sovik, commented on an edited volume on the Chinese Catholic Church published in 1995 that the contributors, in writing their articles, offered “hope for the future of a living, dynamic church in tomorrow’s China.”

There was greater recognition of the necessity and importance of providing more and improved training for priests and nuns. Given the essential role of exchange, priests and nuns who were chosen by the approved bishops and were approved by the government could enroll in courses held outside the mainland, for example in the United States. The open church and the underground church had coexisted for so long that the boundary between them had become blurred. Beijing accepted the presence of both the open church and the underground church in society. The concern of the Beijing government was how to deal with the underground church to its own advantage. What were the acceptable modes and boundaries of behavior of the underground church?

These were not straightforward questions. Ongoing changes in Chinese society meant the Beijing government found it necessary to respond to circumstances as they arose. The Fifth National Congress of Catholic Representatives met in Beijing in September 1992, attended by the bishops of the open church. The task of the Congress was to restructure the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference, and the Chinese Catholic Church Administrative Commission due to a demand for streamlining the political organizations that managed the Catholic Church. The congress spelled out the governance arrangements for these three organizations and chose their personnel. The number of Catholics was growing, and Beijing wanted to ensure that they constituted a stabilizing force in
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society. To what extent could the Catholics serve as a stabilizing force in the manner desired by the Communist leaders? This was another complex question.

In the latter half of the 1990s, the Beijing government tried to clarify its religious policy toward Chinese society. The move corresponded with President Jiang Zemin’s visit to the United States in October 1997. The White Paper—Freedom of Religious Belief in China was an assertion on the part of Beijing that it had provided the Chinese people with freedom of religious belief. This proclamation was said to be in line with the contents of the PRC Constitution and mainland laws. At the same time, the White Paper noted that the Beijing government had accepted international agreements on human, civil, and political rights. It was in this period that debates on religious freedom in China took place in the international arena. Beijing’s declaration was aimed at refuting accusations of religious persecution in Chinese society.

Observers outside China had frequently referenced the revival of religion in China since it opened up to the world. Although there were discussions on the reliability of statistics on Chinese Christians and who represented them, Christianity had been developing quickly in the Catholic and Protestant faiths alike.7 As sinologist and Protestant minister Philip L. Wickeri explains, “The revival of religion in China is part of a much broader search for meaning in a society undergoing rapid social change.”8 Although reforms had exerted a great impact on the social and economic realms of China, they had had comparatively little effect on its political dimension. How would China handle the greater changes in society and the economy that were closely related to the political system, which unfortunately had fallen behind in the transformation process?9

The open church had been designated the “official” and “patriotic” church from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the open church and the underground church were not necessarily against each other. In some places, they were observed to coexist in harmony and even to cooperate on certain matters. For example, an open church bishop shared his home with another underground bishop, a situation the government knew about but did not interfere with.10 More important, the Vatican had quietly recognized many open church bishops.11 It was an open secret that the open church bishops were not as “detached” from the Vatican as the Beijing government portrayed them to be. There was also the question of whether some underground bishops really remained as far “underground” as their label suggested.