



The relationship between the spread of the Catholic Church and the shifting agro-pastoral line in the Chahar Region of northern China

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ABSTRACT

The Great Wall of China roughly follows a transition belt between subhumid region and arid/semiarid region, often thought of as a boundary between agricultural and pastoral area. However, in the mid-18th century, the farming activity began to cross the Great Wall and infiltrate the pastoral region. The agro-pastoral line moved substantially northwards and westwards resulting in a changing landscape beyond the Great Wall. The Catholic Church, which had been proselytizing in Inner Mongolia since the turn of the 18th century, played an important role in this historical process. This paper evaluates the role of Catholic churches in this shift of the agro-pastoral line in Chahar Region in the 19th century.

Chahar, a semi-arid region in the southeastern Mongolia Plateau, had a significant Catholic activity after 1700s. As congregation obtained land from the Mongols, missionaries converted local Han Chinese to Catholicism while lending land, housing and farm implements. By 1952 most people living there had been converted. As a result of intensive land management by the Catholic missions, the semiarid landscapes, formerly used for grazing lands, were changed to more intensive agricultural use. This study examines the important role of the practices of an authoritarian religious organization on the movement of the agro-pastoral line and the relationship between those religious missions and environmental change. This study shows that when the missionaries began preaching to the impoverished Han people coming from within the Great Wall rather than the local Mongols of the Chahar Region, increasing numbers of Han Catholic villages appeared beyond the Great Wall, cultivating what used to be grazing land. Meanwhile, to manage these Han people, the local administrative system was transformed from the Meng-Banner system into Banner-county system. As the name suggests, this latter system was based on Mongol-controlled Banners and Han-controlled counties. Thus the boundary between Banner and county hints at the movement of the agro-pastoral line. By tracking this movement we found that the agro-pastoral line in Chahar region shifted in the late Qing Dynasty. Meanwhile, Catholic villages became more concentrated in the counties, indicating that the Catholic Church had played an important role in this movement of the agro-pastoral line.

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1. Introduction

For centuries, a belt roughly following the line of the Great Wall, separating sub-humid regions from the semi-arid regions beyond, has been thought of as the transitional boundary between cultivated lands and the realm of nomads. Although the political forces of various, Chinese governments and the powers of nomadic tribes might impact the movement of the agro-pastoral line over time, it had been roughly fixed along this belt for over 2000 years. However, masses of Han Chinese had crossed the Great Wall during the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 AD),

with the boundary between farming and animal husbandry shifting northwards and westwards on the Mongolia Plateau at the substantial rate of about 3–6 miles a year since 1840 (Van Melckebeke, 1950). The Catholic Church, which began missionary activities in the region since the early eighteenth century, played an important role in this change and environmental consequences.

In the study of the Catholic Church in Inner Mongolia, much attention has been paid to its proselytization and social works, including economic activities, educational institutions, and medical and health infrastructure, mostly dominated by the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM, Zhao, 1985; Sheng, 1999; Berg, 2002; Verhelst, 2002; Tang and Ma, 2003; Taveirne, 2004; Zhang, 2006). Catholics had changed local society by establishing churches, schools and clinics in the Catholic villages along the Great Wall. Less attention has been paid to the role of the Catholic Church modifying the natural ecosystem, as Han Chinese converts changed grassland to farmland where nomadic Mongols had lived before (Tiedemann, 1994; Zhang et al., 2009).

Abbreviations: CM, Congregation of Priests of the Mission (Lazarites); CICM, Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae); Kalgan, City and region name, located in the southern Chahar Region, closes to the Great Wall; Shezhiju, Administrative region, used in the Republican China.

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As little is known about the role played by the Catholic Church in the movement of the agro-pastoral line, we have chosen to examine the Chahar area, located in the southeastern Mongolia Plateau, to show how the Catholic church impacted the shifting of the agro-pastoral line and otherwise impacted environmental evolution along the Great Wall from the mid-Qing period (circa 1730) to the end of the Republican era (1949) (Zhao, 1985; Sheng, 1999).

2. Regional setting

The Chahar area refers to the region dominated by the nomadic Chahar Mongol tribe during the Qing dynasty and the early Republic of China. In 1928 the region became Chahar Province, an administrative division that lasted until 1952. And it was almost considered as the Central Mongolia Vicariate, founded by the Belgium-based Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM) in 1883 (Fig. 1).

Lying between the Inner Mongolia Plateau and the North China Plain, the elevation of the Chahar area gradually increases in a north-eastern direction from 800 m above sea level in the southwest to 1800 m in the northeast (Fujino, 1932; Department of Geography in Inner Mongolia Normal University, 1965; Gazette editorial Board of

Table 1
Statistics of Mongolia Vicariate in middle of 19th century.

Papalists	16,000
Convert in 1844	30
Missionaries	5
Native priests	8
Chapels	7

Hebei Province, 1993). There are low mountains and hills in the eastern and southern parts, and upland grassland in the west and the north. The Hunshandake Desert, in which there are many stabilized dunes and semi-stabilized dunes, passes from northwest to southeast in the center of the region (Yang et al., 2013). Rivers flow through the eastern and southern parts of the region (Department of Geography in Inner Mongolia Normal University, 1965; Gazette editorial Board of Hebei Province, 1993).

Chahar is characterized by a semi-arid, continental monsoon climate. The mean annual temperature is in the range of 1.0 to 2.0 °C. The mean temperature in January falls between −18 °C and −22 °C, with extreme temperatures as low as −42.4 °C recorded. The mean temperature in July is between 18.6 °C to 22.6 °C, with extreme

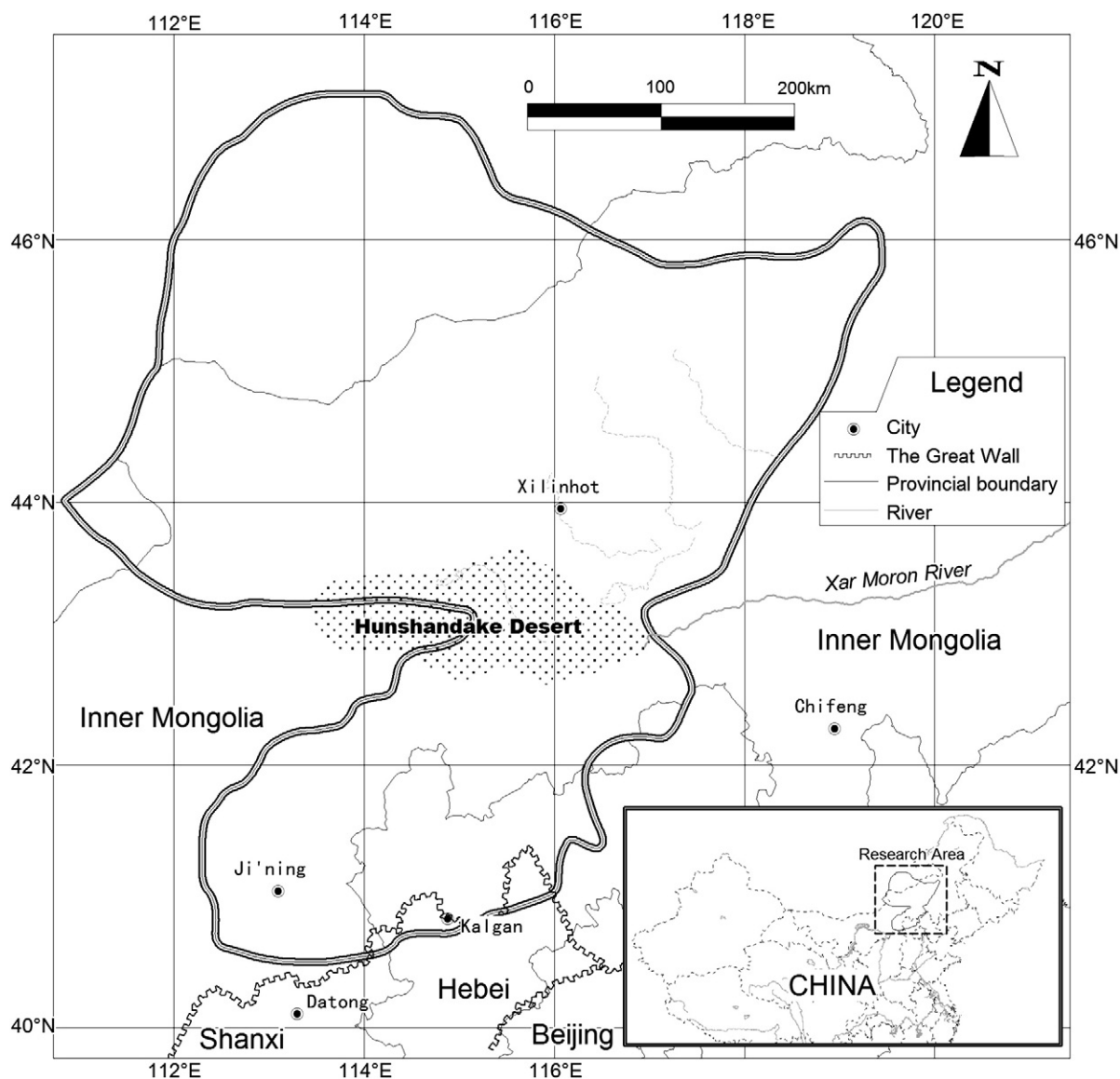


Fig. 1. Location of the study area.
Modified from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Atlas, 2001.

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