THE CHANGING FACE OF THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN CHINA

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The shift southward has been one of the most significant developments of global Christianity after the Second World War.[1] The miraculous re-birth and growth of churches in China is no doubt one of the highlights of this development. The story of Chinese Protestant churches after 1949 has been well told. How western missionaries were forced out of the country, how the churches were drastically and radically re-shaped by the Three-self Movement, how the activities of churches were increasingly restricted since the late 1950s, and eventually outlawed during the Cultural Revolution, and how the churches came to life and has been experiencing steady growth since the 1980s all testify to the achievements of more than one hundred years of missionary efforts and resilience of Chinese Christian community, and above all of the work of God in that ancient land.

Entering the twentieth-first century, the amazing story of the Chinese church continues to unfold. While the pace of growth has not slowed down, new phenomena and dynamics are emerging. They give us, the observers of Protestant Christianity in China, new hope, and also pose new challenges.

Since the 1950s the state-church relationship has ever been a crucial factor in the evolution of church in China. The church life is very much shaped and over-shadowed by government religious policy and the church's attitude toward that authority. It continues to be so after the 1980s. As the communist party started its reform campaign, it acknowledged tremendous complexity and the persistence of the religious issue, and restored the practice of a united front and a policy of religious tolerance. Its law and policy protect citizens' religious rights. No longer condemning religion as opium of the people, the party now realizes that religion could be a positive or stabilizing force to the regime and to society, if guided and controlled properly. To help and guide religion to be a force of this kind has become a dominant theme in its handling of religious affairs. In other words the essence of the party's thinking and decisions in religious affairs can be summarized in two words: tolerance but control. To achieve their goals the party and government set up sophisticated agencies.[2] In the wake of the political changes in Eastern Europe and the

[1] See Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 24, No.2 (April 2000): 50-58.

[2] See Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Churc*h, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), pp27-41; David H. Adeney, *China: The Church Long March,* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1985), capt.5, p226;For an extensive historical survey, see Jonathan Chao, ed. *Chinese Communist Policy toward Christianity*, (Chinese) (Hong Kong: Chinese Church Research Center, 1983).

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Falungong incident, the party has become more alarmed by the potential danger of losing control of religious forces, and thus paid even greater attention to them.

The change of party policy certainly means more room for church growth, but it also means that the state continues to play a major role in shaping church life. As we all know, the Chinese Protestant church has been divided into the public church or Three Self-Church and the house (or underground) church ever since the 1960s. This division occurred largely as the consequence of different attitudes toward state intervention in church affairs. Till today this division, instead of denominationalism, remains one of the dominant features of the Protestant Church in China. However, throughout the 1990s, there are new developments noteworthy in both the Three-Self Church and the house churches.

The Changing Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)

The emergence of The Three-Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC) in the 1980s was no doubt a landmark event. Throughout the 1980s the TSPM spearheaded the rehabilitation and growth of the Protestant community in China. And it was the most important, if not the only, voice for the entire church. Its achievements are undeniable: it played a key role in re-opening churches, it reprinted millions of copies of the Bible, it restarted theological education and trained a large number of pastors for the churches, it facilitated the dramatic increase of number of believers, it encouraged the churches to get involved in the social witness, it helped forge a friendly and constructive relationship with the authority, and it helped the church open up to the outside world and become a part of the global Christian community.

A plain fact is that the current TSPM was initiated in the 1950s. As society and culture are getting more pluralistic, the vision and structure of the movement are facing more challenges, and its leadership is seeking a new solution and image.

First, ever since the moment of founding, one of the major goals of the TSPM has been to encourage believers to embrace the social and political establishment. This goal has never changed, and the TSPM related efforts got even more intensive since the 1980s. To adapt to socialist society and to cooperate in the socialist construction feature very prominently in the thinking and work the TSPM.[3] TSPM theologizing also reflected this essential feature. Theologically the TSPM always places a lot of stress on God's creation over corrupting sin, immanence over transcendence and love over judgment. Believers are urged to see positive value and significance in the work of non-believers, and to adopt an affirming attitude toward socialism and the communist party.[4]

[3] See Wang Zuo-an, "Social Responsibilities of Religion he Case of Protestantism in Mainland China," in *Social Function of Religions*, (Chinese) ed. By C.K.Lee, (Hong Kong: Chinese Christian literature Council.ltd., 2004) pp 3-9.

[4] See Deng Fu-cun, "Basic Approach of Theological Construction in China," in *Christianity and Chinese Culture: A Sino-Nordic Conference on Chinese Contexual Theology* (August 13-17, 2003, Lapland, Finland), (Chinese) eds, by Luo Ming-jia & Paul Huang (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2004) 358-368.

In recent years, under the leadership of Bishop Ding Guangxun (also known as K.H.Ting), the TSPM has launched a campaign of theological construction. In Bishop Ding's view, one of the weaknesses of the Chinese church is the lack of extensive theological thinking. In order to meet the challenge, the church needs more theologizing. As a result, a series of conferences have been organized, and church leaders are encouraged to spend time on theological reflection and writing. Bishop Ding's theology provides most of the inspiration and guidance for this campaign. Ding makes efforts to downplay the differences between belief and non-belief and to highlight the central place of love in Christian faith.[5] All these theological efforts aim at laying the foundation for the integration of the Christian community in a socialist society.

However, Ding's theology and theological campaign have been challenged from the very beginning. As the theological scene of the Chinese church has become much more diversified, strong critique of his theology can be heard from time to time. Although the national leadership of the TSPM has tried very hard to advocate his theology within the movement, it is not well-received at the grass-roots level, and most local churches are theologically still under heavy influence of the evangelical tradition.[6] As more and more theological schools are being introduced to China, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reach an extensive consensus in theological thinking of the church. In the rural area where churches are often inadequately ministered, rampant heretical teachings continue to pose a serious threat to the TSPM as well as to the house churches.

Secondly, since the 1980s the number of seminaries and Bible schools under the TSPM system has grown from none to about twenty. However, the existing theological educational institutions still cannot meet the demand of fast growing churches. In most regions a pastor finds himself or herself minister not only to a large urban congregation but also to a network of rural meeting points connected with the central congregation. Inadequately trained and overworked pastors often have little chances for sabbatical and updating of their knowledge and skills. Increasingly the church has a hard time taking care of churches in the countryside and has no resources to handle the new issues of the urban churches.[7]

Thirdly, since the 1990s house churches have experienced phenomenal growth. The TSPM seems to be outgrown quantitatively and qualitatively by the house church movement. The TSPM status as the only voice of Protestant church in China is apparently becoming history, and its legitimacy is being increasingly questioned.

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[5] For his theology, see "Caring for God Creation, the Cosmic Christ, Understanding the Heart of God," in *Love Never Ends, Papers by K.H.Ting,* ed. By Janice Wickeri, (Beijing, Yilin Press, 2000).

[6] For a systematic critique of Ding's theology, see Li Xin-yuan, "Example of Non-believers' Critique of The Selective Works of Ding Guangxun," in *Christian Life Quarterly* (Vol.2, No.4, June 2000, Vol.5, No.1, march 2001) www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclife.nsf

[7] See "An Interview on the Present-Day Church Situation," 1990, *Love Never Ends, Papers by K.H.Ting*, pp 396-397.

Fourthly, Chinese society and culture are undergoing tremendous changes. And the reformed society is vastly different and much more pluralistic now than before. Generally speaking, changes and reform in the TSPM lag behind society. In comparison, the way of thinking and some of policies set by the TSPM leadership are apparently the products of the 1950s, and out of touch with reality. This fact explains the recent conflict between TSPM leadership and Chinese academia. For the former, some scholars go too far in their studies of sensitive issues such as of the Western missionary enterprise before 1949.[8]

Fifthly, after China's entry into the WTO, the country's process of integration into the international community is unstoppable. The overseas Christian communities increasingly have more channels to bypass the TSPM national leadership and develop relationship with local congregations. These outside influences are considerably beyond the TSPM control.

Finally, the TSPM has its own problems, too. The authoritative style of the decision-making process, power-struggles and even corruption have tarnished its image among ordinary believers and created a lot of frustration and disillusionment in its rank of church workers. The governmental control and intervention have certainly contributed to these problems. The hope seems to lie in the younger generation of church leaders who are not satisfied with the status quo and have aspiration for changes.

Changing Face of House Church Movement

Since the 1990s the house church has been the fastest growing sector of Protestantism in China.[9] How to define the house church is always a tricky issue. I would argue that what distinguishes the house churches is their attitude toward the TSPM: they all maintain their independence from the TSPM. The house churches are not necessarily underground, and some of them have successfully registered with the government, and become the so-called independent church. And the house churches are not anti-government. In fact they all accept the teachings of Romans 13. But all house churches hold hostility, suspicion, mistrust or at least reservations about the TSPM, for they perceive the TSPM largely as a governmental tool to control the church, or at least as too closely tied to the authorities.[10] In addition, they are offended by the TSPM and some of its leaders' roles in the past persecution of the church and apparent lack of spiritual vitality of some TSPM leaders and congregations.

[8] In recent years the TSPM leadership has been criticizing some scholars for embracing and advocating a much more favorable view of Western missionaries. The concern is that the historical legitimacy of the TSPM as a movement of anti-imperialist influence within Chinese church is challenged. See Luo Guang-zong ed. *Do Not Forget the Past: How Imperialists used Christianity to Invade China,* (Chinese), (Beijing, The Press of Religious Culture, 2003).

[9] For the development of the house churches in the 1990s, see Jonathan Chao & Rosanna Chong, *A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997,* (Taipei, Taiwan: CMI Publishing Co., 1997), 673-684).

[10] See Epaphras Wu Wei-zun, "What is wrong with the TSPM?" in *Christian Life Quarterly* (Chinese) (Vol.7, No.4, December 2003).

From the very beginning the house churches have demonstrated certain well-known features: they are theologically evangelical, highly indigenized, heavily relying on lay involvement and leadership, and show zeal for evangelism.

As Chinese society is increasingly pluralized, and the government is retreating from some arenas of social life, the house churches find unprecedented needs and opportunities for the Gospel. In the meantime, political, intellectual and cultural environments are becoming much more complex. It is no wonder that some important new developments can be detected in the house churches.

First, till the mid-1990s the house churches were still strongest in rural areas, and many of their members tended to be elderly and women or poorly educated people from lower classes. However, in recent years the highest growth rate is with house churches in urban areas. Chinese intellectuals used to be one of the groups most hostile to the gospel. But recent evangelization among urban intellectuals (especially relatively younger generation) and professionals is very successful. Campus evangelism is also developing very rapidly. Today it is not difficult to find college professors and lawyers in urban house churches, and some of them have taken up leadership roles. It is fair to say that the center of house churches is shifting, and the features and make-up of house churches are changing drastically. On the other hand, many churches in rural areas are experiencing and decline and crisis largely due to economic down-turns and migration of labor forces.

Secondly, if their theological orientation is still dominated by the evangelical tradition, the style of worship and administration of urban house churches definitely reflect their urban roots. In some ways church life seems more modern or westernized. An increasing number of church members are converted from a non-Christian background. The churches set up different types of fellowship to cater to the needs of different social groups. Nowadays it is not difficult to find Christian fellowships for businessman, house wife, and the elderly, etc. The churches are usually more open to cultural and social issues.[11]

Thirdly, the TSPM claims that the Chinese church is in a post-denominational era. But recent signs indicate that certain denominational divisions or identities begin to re-emerge. Some belong to indigenous traditions such as Little Flock, and others have foreign origins. (Calvinism has become very influential among house churches in some major cities recently).

Fourthly, theological education is badly needed by both rural and urban churches. The insufficient theological training has left room for heretic teachings to spread.

Fifthly, if the house churches maintain their momentum of growth, it is possible that the TSMP will be marginalized in the future. How soon this happens depends very

[11] For a survey of characters of urban house churches, see Gao Shi-ning, "The Beliefs of Urban Christian Community in China: A Case Study of Beijing," in *Christianity and Chinese Culture: A Sino-Nordic Conference on Chinese Contexual Theology (August 13-17, 2003, Lapland, Finland),* ed*s,* by Luo Ming-jia & Paul Huang (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2004), pp292-304.

much on the religious policy of the government. The new regulation of the State Council, issued in March of 2005, seems to allow any church to be legitimized by registering with the authority. Some house churches are seriously considering making the move toward registration.

Finally, once more religious freedom is granted, house churches would face tremendous opportunities as well as challenges. For one thing, how to coordinate and organize thousands of independent churches across the country into a kind of system or network is an urgent issue.

We must realize that the division between the TSPM and house churches is not absolute. The suspicion and hostility between them at the top level may be deep-rooted and intense. But it is much less so at the grass-roots level. In fact, there is often considerable cooperation between the TSPM and house congregations. The reconciliation between two traditions has already happened and is likely to be completed as circumstances change.

Christians Within Chinese Academia

If you focus on churches (the TSPM as well as house church) only, you get only part of the picture of Protestantism in contemporary China. This is an amazing feature of the Christian story in China in recent decades. Since the 1980s the Christian influence in Chinese society has been advanced by not only churches but also by other forces, primarily academia. If we can consider the TSPM and the house churches as the first and second forces, we may recognize Chinese academia as the third force.

An increasing number of scholars interested in and even having a favorible view of Christianity is certainly a new phenomenon in Chinese intellectual history. For over one thousand years of Christian presence in China, the Chinese intellectual community had always been either ignorant or critical of Christianity. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, many intellectuals got disillusioned with both Chinese traditional culture and the Marxist experiment, and began to seek a new meaning of life and future path for the Chinese nation and society. As a result, some of them turned their eyes to Christianity.

They found that Christian teaching makes a lot of sense in their search for a new world view and meaning of life, and Christianity can play a crucial role in China cultural transformation. Therefore, they developed a very favorable view of Christianity and even a great deal of sympathy with it. In their mind, the spread of Christianity in China is in the best interest of the nation. Most of these intellectuals got to know Christianity through their own studies and reflection on Chinese cultural history, but not through church experience. It is also through their own studies that they gained a more advanced knowledge of Christianity than most of the church workers and seminary faculty have.

Generally speaking, these intellectuals tend to treat Christianity as a philosophical and cultural phenomenon. Most of them have difficulty in accepting Christian faith. For this reason they are given the name of cultural Christians. They usually do not maintain a lasting

and deep relationship with the church. For most of them, church life, at least in the TSPM churches, is more tailored to the less-educated people. Their studies of Christianity and advocating of Christian values are largely carried outside the TSPM system. As the fruits of the TSPM theological construction are yet to come, current theological discourse in China is still dominated by these so-called cultural Christians.[12] The contributions of Chinese academia to Chinese Christianity have been widely acknowledged. They have played a major part in changing the image of Christianity in the eyes of the general public. Through their efforts Christian ideas have become a very significant force in the overall landscape of Chinese intellectual life. For one thing they are the driving force behind the blossoming of Christian studies programs in China's universities and research institutions. It is no wonder that Bishop Ding made some very favorable comments about them.[13]

Today most of these cultural Christians are in their late fifties or sixties. The new generation of intellectuals in the field of Christian studies in China has demonstrated a very different spiritual outlook.[14] Professionally just as vigorous as their previous generation, some of the young scholars have accepted Christian faith, and are involved in the church, especially the house church. They engage in theological reflection not just as a purely academic interest but as a way to directly serve the church. Most of these young Christian intellectuals hold teaching or researching positions outside the church, but actively participate in church life.

In the past the churches and Christian studies developed rather separately in China. As a young generation of Christian scholars arrives on the scene, the situation is bound to change. An integration of house churches and intellectuals is underway. The trend seems to further strengthen the house church movement and give it an edge over the TSPM.

As we look back at church growth in China for the past twenty-five years, God 's work is so amazing and so mind-boggling. The influence of Christianity in Chinese society spread at unprecedented speed and in many unexpected ways. Always caught by surprise, churches in China as well as abroad often find themselves trying to understand the new phenomena and fast changing situation, and to catch up, instead of trail-blazing for the Gospel in China. As Chinese society and culture are undergoing fast and fundamental changes, we can be sure that there will be new surprises to come. We can witness the amazing work of God and be called to be a part of it. Just as China's economic take-off has already made a significant impact on the global economy, the substantial growth of the Chinese church may have a similar effect on global Christianity.

Mennonite missionaries came to China in the early twentieth century. Ever since

[12] For a full scholarly discussion of this phenomenon, see *Cultural Christians: Phenomenon and Argument*, (Chinese), (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997).

[13] See *Works of Ding Guangxun,* (Chinese),(Beijing, Yilin Press, 1998), p 488.

[14] An excellent survey of Christian studies in China and different generations of scholars in the field is "The New Trend of Christian Studies in China" by Dong Jiang Yang, *CGST Journal*, No.39 (July 2005): 223-233.

then they remained a part of the Protestant missionary movement in China. A uniquely Anabaptist voice can scarcely be heard in the past as well as in the present. Nevertheless, in my view, Anabaptism has a lot to contribute in the Chinese context. As churches grow very rapidly and take in many new converts, the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship is very significant in building up the community of believers. As China faces potential internal and external conflicts, the Anabaptist message of peace-making is very relevant, and can equip the believers well in their social witness. Therefore, the opportunities that Mennonites are facing in China are tremendous.