



The House Church Movement: A Participant's Assessment

JIALI WANG

Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, California

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE YEAR 1949 IS THE WATERSHED IN CHINESE CHURCH HISTORY. IT SAW THE Chinese Communist Party (CCP) taking over China, the establishment of a new republic, and the end of a foreign mission movement which had lasted for a century since the Opium War in the 1840s. Before 1949 the Christian movement in China appeared to be a display of foreign denominations along with some indigenous churches. When the country entered a new era, the CCP prepared a totally new policy toward Christianity, and the church was faced with a new situation.

Understanding the mind of the policy makers is important for our understanding of the religious policies of the state. The decisive factors are: (1) the Marxist atheist ideology wherein religion is the opiate of the people and communism seeks to hasten the process whereby religion withers away; (2) the conflict in

JIALI WANG, from a house church in China, is a Ph.D. student at Fuller. His dissertation topic is "The House Church Movement: An Indigenous Expression of Christianity in Modern China." He is also the pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Monterey Park, California.

The house church movement arose in China in the 1950s in reaction to the state's exclusion of foreign missionaries, oppression of Chinese Christians, and collaboration with an indigenous Three-Self Movement. It was a lay movement used by God to maintain and spread the gospel. Now Christian growth calls for reconciling the Three-Self and house church movements.

allegiance brought about by the CCP's demand for total allegiance from the people; (3) the hostility built up between the church and the CCP when Chinese Christians were encouraged by foreign missionaries to pray to God for the military failure of the CCP; and (4) the military threat from western powers when the Korean War broke out at China's doorway less than ten months after the birth of this new republic.

It was hard for the CCP to bear the fact that there were millions of Christians in its country who were under the ideological influence of the avowed foreign enemies. All these factors provided the basis for the religious policy of the CCP, which required that religions, particularly western Christianity, must be put under control and finally exterminated. In comparison with the Stalinist tradition in the former USSR, the religious policy of the CCP was quite modest. But the ultimate goal remained the same, that religions must disappear in China. According to Chou En-lai:

We are going to let you go on trying to convert people, provided you also continue your social services. After all, we both believe that truth will prevail. We think your beliefs untrue and false; therefore if we are right, the people will reject them and your church will decay. If you are right, then the people will believe you; but as we are sure that you are wrong, we are prepared for that risk.¹

II. THE THREE-SELF PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT

In order to solve the problem of Chinese Christianity, the CCP and some of the church leaders borrowed the three-self principle (self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating) and launched a Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) which continues today (with many modifications). The TSPM was an accommodation between the atheist CCP and a group of nationalistic church leaders who could accept a church that was to some degree under the control of the state. Some strong church leaders, like Wang Mingdao, totally rejected such an accommodation and remained loyal to their ideal of independent churches; they boycotted the movement and were later persecuted.

A. Nationalization

The first goal of the CCP was to get rid of foreign control and influence over Chinese churches. At the end of 1951, the last foreign missionaries were expelled from China. The exclusion of foreign missionaries and foreign influence continues today; such foreign influence is believed to be fatal to the stability of China under the CCP. Some foreign church leaders and overseas Chinese still try to reopen the closed door, which causes renewed conflict with the CCP.

The establishment of the TSPM paralleled the nationalizing of industry and the Korean war. Foreign influence was no longer to be tolerated in China. The backyard must be cleaned up and China must be totally under the control of the CCP. Leadership of the Chinese church was shifted to the national leaders.

¹Quoted by C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Birth of Communist China* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964) 138.

B. Instrumentalization

After the TSPM was used to nationalize the church, the CCP began its second step to exterminate Christianity in 1956, using the TSPM as its instrument. All Christians and church leaders were asked to join the TSPM or to give up their faith. Those who insisted upon an independent church were persecuted, including Wang Mingdao and others. Criticizing meetings were held in the TSPM churches and the unyielding leaders persecuted. It is estimated that some 8,000 church leaders were put in labor camps for as much as ten to twenty years. Sisters and brothers who saw the merciless persecution, betrayal, the disowning of the Lord, and the high level of distrust left the church. Church attendance greatly declined toward the end of the 1950s.

C. Total Extermination

During the Cultural Revolution (CR) of 1966-1976 there was no religious toleration at all. Even the TSPM and its collaborators were not exempt from persecution. All churches were closed except for one shopwindow church in Beijing, where George Bush attended while he was a diplomat there. All religious activity was prohibited in China. "At that time [1967], Jiang Qing [Mao Zedong's wife] said that Christianity in China had already been put into a museum, and that there were no more believers."² The CCP's ultimate goal to eradicate Christianity was unfolded and realized in the Cultural Revolution.

Chinese Christians had either to give up their faith or to find another way to carry it on. Little information about Chinese Christians came out of China at that time. Outside churches believed that Christianity would be extinct and the fruit of the mission movement totally lost. Many mission leaders were waiting for the collapse of the CCP and the subsequent launching of a new mission movement.

III. THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

Unlike the disciples in Jerusalem who could flee persecution and establish churches in Antioch, Chinese Christians were confined to where they lived. China enforced residential registration, and people did not have the freedom to move about or to go abroad. Believers had to live in extremely hostile circumstances and bear witness for the Lord there. Most of them chose to defy the overwhelming anti-religious policy. They were looking for a way to worship God and express their faith.

A. From the Periphery

In China, the family might be the only place where the CCP exercised minimal control over the people. No one knows for sure when Chinese Christians began their house church activity, how many people participated, and in which geographic areas. But we know that the house church activity began sometime in the mid-1950s, for a state policy issued in 1956 prohibited TSPM church leaders from attending house gatherings. Obviously Chinese Christians were dissatisfied

²Carl Lawrence, *The Church in China* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985) 56.

with the extermination policy, the persecution, the split, the politicization of faith, and the betrayal by some TSPM leaders. They left the controlled church and went underground to pursue the faith. The house church movement was more active in areas where there had been strong influence of an indigenous Christian movement before 1949. From the late 1950s to the late 1970s the house church movement remained small and operated primarily underground and in secret to avoid unnecessary attention and persecution. However, even in these initial stages the house church movement helped Chinese Christians preserve their faith and continue to bear witness for the Lord.

B. Beginnings

Each house church has its own proudly unique story of origin. Here is a sample, told by Brother Zhao. Both he and his wife were Christians before 1949. They were criticized for their faith even before the CR. During the CR they felt so bitter and so oppressed that they were pushed to reliance on God. They had not prayed together for a long time because of political pressure. Once when Zhao woke up in the middle of the night, he saw his wife kneeling in front of the bed and praying silently. He stole away from the bed and quietly knelt beside her, praying. That night they felt the presence of God and began regular family worship. One night their daughter saw their secret worship and asked what they were doing. They told her about their faith. She asked why they had kept this from her, to which they responded that they would be heartbroken to see her persecuted for faith in Christ as they had been. She told them she was longing for Christ. From then on the whole family worshiped together. Years later when the political situation began to relax, Zhao ran into a Christian brother on the street. They asked each other if they had still remembered their faith. They discovered that they shared a similar religious experience and invited each other to worship together. Thus, a new house church was born in Beijing—just one among the thousands in China.

The seeds of faith had been sown in China during the mission movement, Chinese souls remained thirsty for salvation, and the power of the gospel was never uprooted. The house church movement was a door opened by God in China.

C. A Tale of Many Numbers

The horrific Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Deng Xiaoping, a more tolerant leader, took power. He converted the extermination policy into religious control as a part of social control. The TSPM was restored, and the jailed Christian leaders were released from labor camps in the early 1980s. The reopened churches of the TSPM brought public witness to the people, and the released underground leaders became more active in evangelism nationwide. Millions of people have accepted the faith in various ways. About 90% of today's Chinese Christians became Christian after 1980. They actively gather either in the open churches, in house churches, or in both. The Chinese Christian movement has entered a new era.

Outside of China, church and mission leaders had been quite pessimistic

about the Chinese Christian movement. "The church was thought to have died. As late as the summer of 1979, a Protestant mission executive wrote that 'organized Christianity in the People's Republic of China has, as far as we can see, disappeared.'"³ Even the widely noted church statistician David B. Barrett believed in 1982 that in the mid-1970s the total number of Chinese Christians was 200,000 and that by the mid-1980s only 180,000 Christians remained among the total population of one billion.⁴ The house church movement became known to the world only in the mid-1980s. According to Barrett, "Suddenly, by 1986 China has become the fastest-expanding nation for church growth ever. This year's surveys indicate that China has a total of at least 81,600 worship centers (church, congregations, house groups) with 21,500,000 baptized adult believers, and a total Christian community of 52,152,000 Christians affiliated to churches, including children."⁵ This is one of the numbers provided by a noted church statistician about ten years ago.

Jonathan Chao, a researcher of the Chinese church, reported two extreme figures in 1989: 5 million as an "official" number and 100 million, according to an unnamed Asian researcher. Chao points out, "Accepting the lower, official estimate of five million as an accurate accounting of church growth is probably as gullible as it is wishful thinking to accept the highest estimate of 100 million as representative of true conversions."⁶ He affirms, "House church leaders and itinerant evangelists have placed their estimates in the range of 30-60 million (30 million in 1982, 60 million in 1989)."⁷

In 1991 Kim-Kwong Chan and Alan Hunter suggested there might be around 20 million protestants in China.⁸ Tony Lambert in 1994 compiled the figures from 30 provinces, according to the TSPM and government statistics. The total number was 9,410,000.⁹ "Figures of fifty million or even higher have been speculated by some overseas Christian observers, but no evidence has been published to support such high figures."¹⁰

The latest figures are reported in the *Chinese Daily News* of June 7, 1996. According to an official of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, there were "8 million Protestant Christians, 18 thousand clergy, some eight thousand churches and 20 thousand gathering centers."¹¹

In my opinion, it is impossible for anybody except God to have an accurate number of Christians in China. Without the support of the Chinese government

³G. Thompson Brown, *Christianity in the People's Republic of China* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) 159.

⁴David Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford University, 1982) 234.

⁵David Barrett, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1987," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11/1 (January 1987) 24.

⁶Jonathan Chao, *The China Mission Handbook* (Hong Kong: Chinese Church Research Center, 1989) 79.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Kim-Kwang Chan and Alan Hunter, *Prayers and Thoughts of Chinese Christians* (Boston: Cowley, 1991) 12.

⁹Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Show, 1994) 142.

¹⁰Ibid., 143.

¹¹*Chinese Daily News* (Monterey Park, CA), 7 June 1996, A10.

and sufficient funds, no meaningful survey can be conducted. Because of the underground nature of some house churches, no reliable registered numbers are available for the investigators. Government officials suppress the figures because they want to minimize the impact of the Christian movement. TSPM pastors know only the registered membership. Some overseas observers are inclined to overstate the figures to glorify God's work in China. In my experience as a house church participant for years, there is a huge overlap of those who go to both open churches and house churches. I estimate there are between 20 and 30 million confessing Christians in China.

The figures themselves are not so important if we view the Chinese Christian movement from other perspectives. The house church movement not only survived the persecution and extermination of the CCP but also has expanded at an unprecedented rate. The house church movement developed in an extremely hostile environment with no institutional church, no Christian crusade, no foreign missionaries, no mission funds, no Bible, no Christian literature, and no ordained clergy. However, the last two decades of this century have seen amazing church growth in China. The gospel vividly demonstrates its power in this most heavily populated country. What people should keep in mind is that in China the gospel has taken root and that there is still a mission field of over one billion people. This fact is more important than accurate statistics.

D. Relational Evangelism

From the traditional and the western ecclesiastical view, the rapid growth of the house church in China seemed inexplicable. Yet people failed to see two important conditions for church growth in China: the disillusioned people and relational evangelism.

Mao was enshrined as an idol in China, and communism was a beautiful promise for the people. Now both are bankrupt and Chinese people suffer from disillusionment. But they continue to long for a faith to guide their lives. People are fed up with lies, yet they are still seeking something true in which to believe. The presupposition of Christian evangelism is that the gospel of Christ is what all people are longing for in their souls. So the disillusionment of the Chinese people produces a huge faith or ideological void which provides a unique opportunity for Christian evangelism. It is the disillusionment and the thirst of souls that drives people to the living water and to the love of God.

Chinese Christians took the opportunity to reach people with the gospel in a unique way: relational evangelism. Because of the oppression of the atheist CCP, Chinese Christianity went underground. Christians in such a situation had to preach the gospel in secret or in private. They were not allowed to preach to strangers in the street, but they could share their faith with relatives and friends. Listeners saw the witness of Christians and tried the faith for themselves. For many, it proved true.

In a society of information explosion, relational evangelism is more effective than propositional preaching. Modern people are immunized by mass media and

bombarding advertising. They are not able to differentiate between what is true and what is false. Too often the Christian message is trivialized as one more piece of junk information. But people are serious about information received from acquaintances, people who are not thought to spread that information for personal gain. Such relational evangelists simply say what they believe. To the listeners, their witness is more intimate, contextual, and credible than the words of public speakers. In such a simple way, Christian faith is spread. As for me, I have personally known more than one hundred communists, but no one ever tried to convert me to communism. I was, however, converted by the first Christian with whom I spoke.

E. A Quality Laity

Those who placed the hope of Chinese evangelization in foreign missions should be excused for being pessimistic:

For twenty-five years there had been no foreign missionary activity. There was every reason to think that the results which had been achieved through 150 years of effort would be lost—that like the efforts of the Nestorians in the seventh century and the Franciscans in the thirteenth, all significance of the Christian faith would vanish from Chinese soil.¹²

But despite the demise of denominational traditions, God's will was fulfilled by native Chinese Christians. Chinese Christians were commissioned to spread the gospel independently, even under the most severe persecution and extermination.

During the CR, Chinese clergy were accused of being running dogs of foreign religion in robe. TSPM pastors and leaders were sent to factories or farms to have their thinking reformed, and those who were unyielding to the TSPM had already been consigned to prisons or labor camps. But even under persecution, many remained sure of their salvation and bore witness to the people. Chinese Christians were not converted by the promise of worldly success but by the true faith. To be a Christian meant to be mocked as superstitious, to be fired from the job, and even to be persecuted. Under such harsh conditions, Christians believed in God for only one reason—the truth of the love of God. They were quality believers and became ministers of the word.

The word of God is for everybody and by everybody. Without clergy, the word was spread in China by the laity—the quality Christians. The harsh conditions produced Chinese Christians who lived out their faith steadfastly and who persistently expanded the kingdom. The Christian mission in China was done mainly by the laity who were the special product of the hardship they endured.

F. The Future of the House Churches

The future of the house church movement depends not only on how it grows but also on how it relates to the whole society. Now there is a triangle of tensions in Chinese Christianity: tensions between the CCP and the TSPM, between the CCP and the house churches, and between the TSPM and the house churches.

¹²Brown, *Christianity in the People's Republic*, 159-160.

Handling the three tensions with divine wisdom will be the key to future development.

The CCP is no longer the same persecutor as under Mao. It is reshaping its ideology, economy, and practice. The CCP now gives people the freedom of faith, but Chinese still do not have full freedom of speech and assembly. The CCP no longer pursues the goal of eradicating Christianity, but religions remain under some level of state control. The party endeavors to improve the economy in China, but still retains tight control of mass media.

The TSPM has two major problems: the lapse of its collaboration with the CCP in the 1950s and an ongoing level of control by the CCP. The TSPM is now also used by God to print millions of Bibles and literature, to mediate between the CCP and Chinese Christians, to open two to three local churches every day, to train church leaders in seminaries, and to be a visible witness. There is a struggle for control between the CCP and the TSPM. It is hard for the CCP to tolerate the growing influence of Christianity in the nation. The TSPM needs to be understood and accepted by house church participants, as it is renewed and transformed and gradually rids itself of CCP control.

The house churches need legitimacy, unity, leadership training, and literature supply. They should gradually come out from underground, unite together, and become a reviving power in Chinese Christianity. The CCP tries to control the house churches through the TSPM. But some defiant house church leaders are loyal to the ideal of an independent church. The CCP fears any major mass movement not under its control and foreign powers that attempt to convert the house church movement into a dissident one. Both seem to be subversive to the CCP.

Reconciliation and mutual acceptance between the TSPM and the house churches will greatly facilitate the growth of Christianity in China.

IV. CONCLUSION

The modern Christian movement in China is unique. The door of foreign missions was closed by the CCP in 1949. The door of a nationalized and controlled TSPM was opened from 1954 to 1966 and closed in the extermination. In the midst of persecution and extermination, Chinese Christians began their house gatherings to worship God on the political and religious periphery. Faithful quality lay Christians expanded the kingdom through relational evangelism. This movement not only allowed Christianity to survive, but to expand, even in extremely hostile circumstances. The house church movement is a strong reviving power for Chinese churches. The restoration of the TSPM in the early 1980s brought forth a visible church and public witness. There are strengths, tensions, and weaknesses in both. In any case, the Chinese Christian movement will keep moving forward through the doors God opens. ⊕