



*In this edition...*

*sunset in Nanjing #1 by Jordi Payà, on Flickr , cropped*

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Over the past forty years, reformed theology has become influential among Chinese Christians and, more recently, especially among mainland Chinese Christian intellectuals. This has resulted in reformed thought transitioning into a reformed church movement that is bringing about positive changes. At the same time, there are cautions to be observed within this movement.

**Liberalism and China's Churches**

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After defining the term “liberalism,” the author introduces the liberal intellectuals, many of them city dwellers, who began joining churches and consequently have created tension between liberalism and Christian perspectives. He explores churches’ reactions to this tension and also discusses the attitude of anti-liberals toward Christianity.

**Urban Churches in China: A Pentecostal Case Study**

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An author has noted that societies being shaped by the forces of modernization and urbanization represent fertile ground for the seeds of Pentecostal revival. Menzies supports this claim in a case study that gives us the history and growth of the Li Xin Church, a large, Pentecostal house-church network.

**Eschatology and China's Churches**

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The question of a church’s eschatology concerns its future and also determines how its people live in today’s world. While house churches included a brief summary of their eschatology in a 1998 document, within the theology of the official Three-Self Church eschatology lacks a working category; it finds itself situated under communist ideology as any form of it appears to be a threat to the ideology of the government. The church in China must ask itself what biblical, orthodox eschatology is and how it can be preached.

### View from the Wall

**Public Theology in China: Some Preliminary Reflections**

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The persistent lack of open government in many areas of China makes it difficult for Christians to be very different from the general population. Yet, Christians in China are citizens of God’s eternal kingdom as well as citizens of China. However, as citizens of this world, they seem to have failed to live very profoundly as citizens of the eternal world. Can the tension between these two citizenships be resolved?

### Book Reviews

**Making Pentecost Your Story: 50 Days of Reflection and Prayer by Robert Menzies**

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Following a brief overview of the church in China, this book provides 50 daily devotional readings covering seven weeks. Each reading begins with a Scripture passage followed by a short story based on Dr Menzies’ own experiences with Christians in China.

**China's Reforming Churches by Bruce P. Baugus, ed.**

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*Reviewed by Jennifer Guo*

This volume is written from the conviction that China’s need for church development is largely the need for the development of a healthy and robust presbyterianism that comes from an understanding of biblical theology of the church as articulated within the Reformed tradition. It frequently corrects common erroneous presuppositions and reveals that within China there is a surprising amount of freedom for Christians—and even for the officially illegal, unregistered churches

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## Editorial

### Toward a Chinese Theology

By Brent Fulton, Editor

In its journey toward a theology that is uniquely “Chinese” the Chinese church has at various times clashed with longstanding cultural and religious traditions, weathered and responded to severe domestic turmoil, and intersected with a range of theological influences from abroad.

Looking at just the past century, Watchman Nee emerges as a touchstone for the Chinese church and a respected theological voice outside China. Along with Nee, leaders in China’s other indigenous movements, many from a Pentecostal tradition, laid the foundation for a church that was distinct from the established denominations with Western missionary roots.



[Ink-ed # 2 by Nick Lo, on Flickr](#)

Allowed to flourish following the Cultural Revolution, this indigenous house church movement developed its own “pathway of the cross” theology, giving voice to its identity as a persecuted church that was quite separate from this world. Under the TSPM, meanwhile, a push for religion to serve socialism led Bishop Ding Guangxun in the 1990s to promote a theology of “justification through love.” Ding’s effort at theological reconstruction may have caught the imagination of some in the theological community overseas but was roundly rejected at home. In the years since, with the rise of civil society has come a new theological stream that seeks to position the church constructively within society, yet with a prophetic voice toward social and political institutions.

It is against this backdrop that we look afresh at various currents in the theological life of the church today. We are privileged to have as guest editor of this issue Li Jin, a scholar from China currently studying in the United States. Li and his wife, Ma Li, have brought together a fascinating collection of perspectives, most of them written by church leaders in China. Together these articles speak to the historical antecedents of the church’s theological journey while providing fresh insights into what may lie ahead. We also review two assessments from seasoned outside observers whose different theological orientations mirror some of the diversity found within the contemporary Chinese church.

With China’s rise come new challenges and opportunities for the church in China. As their theological journey continues, China’s Christians have much to share with the global church about what it means to be the people of God in rapidly changing times.

*Brent Fulton is President of ChinaSource and the editor of ChinaSource Quarterly.*

## Resource Corner

### Films by Gan Xiao’er

#### *Raised from Dust and The Only Sons*

China-based, independent filmmaker, Gan Xiao’er has created two films that explore the lives of modern-day Christians in China. Each film tells the story of a Chinese Christian whose family members are caught up in personal crises that threaten financial ruin and challenge the believer’s faith. Beautiful cinematography provides stunning backdrops for heartbreaking stories that bring to life the realities Christians in China face in their daily lives.

Gan Xiao’er is an independent filmmaker based in China. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1998 and has been teaching at the South China Normal University since his graduation. He set up The Seventh Seal Film Workshop in 2000 with a commitment to producing feature films that explore the spiritual life of the Chinese.

#### *Raised from Dust*

Available at [Fandor](#) and [Amazon](#)



#### *The Only Sons*

Available at [International Film Festival Rotterdam](#).



## Reformed Theology: A Christian Thought Movement to a Church Movement

By Paul Peng

Over the past forty years, reformed theology has become more and more influential among Chinese Christians. I think this is a result of three ministries, including the introduction and translation of classic reformed literature through Reformed Translation Society founded by Pastor Charles Chao (ZHAO Zhonghui), the evangelistic meetings and lectures given by Pastor Stephen Tong, and theological education programs, formal or informal, organized by Pastor Samuel Ling (LIN Cixin) and Stephen Chan (CHEN Zuoren).

During the past fifteen years, these influences have resonated among mainland Chinese Christian intellectuals, which is quite remarkable. When asked why reformed theology appeals to them, their answers generally fall into categories such as: it resolves the cognitive problem between faith and reason; it offers a comprehensive worldview; it provides useful tools in responding to many schools of secular thoughts. Thus, more and more Chinese Christians have become familiar with reformed doctrines, theologians, and literature. Nevertheless, the spread of reformed theology has also brought trouble among Chinese churches, to the extent that many church leaders frown at the mention of it. Their concerns are due to a variety of reasons: a preoccupation with doctrines has overtaken pastoral care; some self-acclaimed reformed believers do not commit themselves to church life, or they have not been spiritually guided in a local church; many are prone to critique rather than to build others up, a trait especially noticeable among those who are active in cyber space.

In recent years, another fascinating phenomenon in mainland China has emerged: the Christian thought movement based on reformed theology has developed into a church movement. This change has been led by a group of church leaders who used to be Christian intellectuals and are now followed by more and more churches and pastors. It is a movement based on a reformed theological understanding of church planting and church polity restructuring. There are many positive changes in this movement.

1. **The institutionalization of churches.** More and more churches are formalizing their confessions, church by-laws, membership rules, and ordination requirements based on classic reformed confessions, such as the Westminster Standards and Heidelberg Catechism.
2. **The founding of Presbyterian classis.** In order to connect with churches in the same locality that share the same confessions, many regional churches have started, or are preparing to start, a Presbyterian classis<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of setting up a regional classis is to lay a foundation for defending the faith against heresies, for training and ordaining ministers, for exercising discipline in disputes involving ministers, and for developing Christian education. A classis network of reformed Baptist churches in China is also forming.
3. **The development of Christian education.** Christian schools are in a fledgling state, and reformed churches are the pioneers working with them. Christian schools founded by churches with a reformed understanding make up a large percentage of all Christian schools in China. This is attributed to the strong emphasis on covenant theology found in reformed churches. Churches are viewed as covenantal communities, and thus our next generation needs to be educated with a holistic, biblical worldview. Based on this theological foundation, educators can better work out the church-school relationship so that the school can receive long-term support from the church.
4. **The practice of Christian disciplines.** Reformed churches emphasize family worship and other spiritual disciplines that are consistent with reformed theology. Pastoral care and counseling ministries are carried out in a biblical manner; believers practice living out their faith in their professional lives.
5. **Church-planting with a kingdom vision.** More and more reformed churches, inspired by kingdom theology, have broken away from tribalism and engaged in broader church-planting ministries. Some reformed seminaries on the mainland have added church-planting courses to their curricula. This helps solve an inherent inward-looking tendency among reformed churches.

Despite these promises and positive changes, I think this movement also shows many signs that deserve notes of caution.

1. **We should be on our guard against sectarianism and emphasize kingdom vision.** Last year during a discussion on denominationalism among reformed leaders, we all reckoned and analogized ourselves as being like one tribe among the twelve tribes of Israel. This means we do not claim to possess all truth, although we do have our unique priorities, such as an emphasis on doctrines and church polity, on education, and a holistic worldview. We believe that these are gifts that would nurture the whole body of Christ. I gladly observe that after many local, reformed churches have become institutionalized they have gained more confidence in their spiritual identity motivating them to share resources as well as connect and collaborate with churches of different theological backgrounds in prayer and mercy ministries.
2. **We should be on our guard against institutionalism and reinforce the concept and practice of life renewal through the grace of the gospel.** Churches cannot function without institutions; however, institutionalism should not exist. If we



Swells in the Middle Kingdom

have institutions without pastors, elders, and coworkers who experience life renewal by the grace of the gospel and who fail to practice listening and humble service, we are not likely to grow into a vibrant spiritual community.

3. ***We should guard against doctrinairism and emphasize spiritual disciplines*** such as scripture reading, meditation, family worship, living out our faith in professional life, and so on. Our biblical faith is systematic and all-encompassing, but at the same time it is also powerful and vibrant. Our faith is practical and applicable. We need to constantly grow in the experiential knowledge of how to live out our faith in our devotional life, family living, and professional life.
4. ***We should guard against a separation from our historical roots and have a clear understanding of how the reformed faith is related to the spirit of house churches.*** China's reformed churches did not originate from a vacuum but from a rich, historical heritage of reformed faith. We also grew out of the soil of China's persecuted house churches. If reformed churches cut themselves off from the house church movement, they will lose a strong sense of historical belonging. The spirit of house churches includes an emphasis on the path of the cross, on freedom of conscience in church-state relationships, and on self-denial in personal devotions. These are all consistent with the Puritan tradition and reformed theology. We should reflect on these and unite the parts that are consistent.

What can churches of other countries do to help China's churches in this movement? First, we have to come to the realization that churches in China have matured to a stage where a parent-child model, indicative of the early missionary stage between foreign countries and churches in China, is no longer feasible. The current relationship needs to be a kind of companionship or partnership. In this respect, I do see huge needs in three areas. First, we need pastoral experience. Most reformed churches in China are made up of first-generation believers who are new converts. We need pastoral experience in our families, churches, and communities. Second, we need more literature, including the translations of classic reformed resources as well as teaching resources for adult Sunday school and children's Sunday school. Third, we need help with theological education and Christian schools.

As a pastor of a reformed Presbyterian church, I hope to address those who share the same reformed understanding in the following way: I desire to see our love and grace being matured with God's help. As mainland China's first generation of reformed churches, we are still ignorant in many areas compared to what we ought to have known. Even by the standard of what we already know, we have not practiced or lived this out fully. Even when examining the things we are practicing, our motives can be purified; we still need to mature. I also hope to address those members of Christ who do not claim to be reformed with the following: If you perceive yourself to be a spiritual descendant of the Reformation, then the "Five Solas" are our common ground. Please do not allow the immaturity of any reformed people you may have met to become the disincentive for your drawing from the rich river of reformed theology. If you identify with house churches as your spiritual heritage, then the Puritans, who suffered for the freedom of conscience, were our forefathers. We have many common battles to fight. Let us pray for one another.

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<sup>1</sup> A governing body over a group of churches within a geographical area; a presbytery.

*Rev. Paul Peng is the founding pastor of Chengdu Blessings Reformed Evangelical Church.*

Translation by Ma Li.



# Liberalism and China's Churches

By Wei Zhou

## Rise of Liberalism in China

At the outset of this article, I would like to clarify what is meant by the term “liberalism.” When Christians hear the term “liberalism,” they will likely think about a liberal theological position. Even outside the context of theology, for churches in America the term liberalism still has negative connotations as a worldview that opposes the church’s traditional stance on social and political issues such as same-sex marriage and legalized abortion. However, this kind of liberalism is not what this article is referring to. Instead, among intellectuals in China, the term “liberalism” is understood in the so-called “classical” sense and is often connected with free market, rule of law, and human rights.



[Cross by Peiyu Liu, on Flickr](#)

Clearly, what classical liberalism advocates is entirely incompatible with Communist ideology. The word “liberalism” has long been a sensitive term in China’s public dialogue, and it did not come to the surface until the 1990s. Since then, a large number of intellectuals, who care about the social and political issues of the day, have begun to call themselves, or have been called, liberals. While their core beliefs may not all be identical, these liberals do share some basic views regarding a market economy, upholding the legal system, advocating for and protecting human rights, demanding democratic elections, and pushing for China’s constitutional reform. Within the last twenty years, liberalism has become the leading ideological trend.

In those twenty years, China saw rapid economic and sharp urban population growth, while at the same time it also observed an increase in social problems and a breakdown in morality. Yet despite this backdrop and prolonged government suppression, urban churches (referenced in this article are the non-official house churches) experienced tremendous expansion. Many city-dwelling, liberal intellectuals began joining churches, changing their way of life.

## Tension between Liberalism and Christian Perspectives

A person comes to Christ as a result of the sovereign election of God and is reborn through the Holy Spirit and the gospel. Yet Christianity undeniably possesses an attraction to the adherents of liberalism because there is an affinity between their worldviews. The gospel proclaims, and the existence of house churches bears witness, that there is a higher authority over the government and that a divine kingdom is approaching. In a country such as China, where free speech and free associations do not really exist, this is an astonishing message. Although the church presents these two freedoms in the spiritual sense, they can also be borne out in political freedom. China’s liberals are amazed by this connection. When they look back into church history, they discover the influence of Christianity in the formation of Western societies and political systems. No doubt this excites the liberals in China because they conclude that the proliferation of Christianity is beneficial, or even essential, to China’s constitutional reform. To say that quite a number of people join the church with this mindset would not be an overstatement.

Some oppose Christianity because it embodies Western ideology. In the same way, liberals in China connect contemporary democracy, particularly the United States’ Constitution, with Christian beliefs. After becoming Christians, Chinese liberals tend to make over-simplified statements as an apologetic argument for the positive impact of Christianity on modern society. To borrow the classic analysis of British historian Herbert Butterfield, this form of analysis is a so-called “Whig Interpretation of History.” The fact is, history is not the product of a single factor, but is determined through a series of complex and often unpredictable happenstances. Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, has undoubtedly influenced the birth of the modern world, but the modern world is really the result of many different forces coming together. These forces include not only the ideas and social structures brought on by the Reformation, but also many other anti-Christian thoughts and philosophies. Therefore, without careful discernment, these types of over-simplified apologetics can lead down the wrong path.

After the Reformation, classical liberalism was conceived by a group of Enlightenment thinkers as modern nations began to be established and the Enlightenment movement developed. Although these thinkers utilized various theological principles to form their ideas, many of those ideas were centered on man, not God, and far removed from traditional Christian beliefs. For example, Enlightenment thinking began with the supposition that there is no God who controls the universe. However, if this is true, what is the standard of morality and political order? Without a sovereign and righteous God, man’s pursuit of good instead becomes pursuit of power. Even if good and virtue are not completely repudiated, they are certainly shelved. Enlightenment thought responded to a particular time in history and did offer new solutions to the social and political challenges of that day. But from a Christian perspective, this man-centered, descending secularism is the complete opposite of the concept of reaching up toward God. It is here that the incompatibility between liberalism and Christianity appears.

## Liberals Converted to Christ and China's Churches

The tension between Christian thinking and classical liberalism confronts the liberal in China with an important question after converting to the faith: How should liberalism be assessed from the perspective of religion? This question is not only a rethinking process at a personal level but is also a question that the entire church needs to respond to.

Historically, churches in China have tended to withdraw from society. Pressure from the Communist government forces religious faith to become private and secretive. Most ministers not only do not discuss politics, they show little interest in any public dialogue. However, today a passionate group of intellectuals, who are concerned with social justice and the progression of China’s political system toward liberalism, has come into the church. They appeal to the church to be the voice of conscience, to be the shining city on

the hill, and to bear witness for Christ in this tumultuous society. To China's churches this plea is an undeniably great challenge and an inspiration. However, different churches have responded to this challenge in very different ways.

The strongest response comes from the newer urban churches. In general, the leaders of these churches are young and not bound by flawed traditions. In some cases, they themselves were liberal intellectuals before coming to Christ. These churches commonly respond in one of two ways. The first is to continue to build themselves up in the faith, seeking answers for social and political ills in an in-depth theology. On certain topics their response may be similar to that of a proponent of liberalism but is definitely gospel-oriented in essence. A second way is to use theology to justify classical liberalism, replacing the gospel message with social and political concerns. What these churches preach will eventually become a social gospel, lacking any call to salvation and repentance.

Many churches that choose to be passive in their response to social and political issues are influenced by a more fundamentalist perspective that "ignorance is virtue." Such churches may also vigorously avoid any social or political discussions on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the separation of church and state. These churches may not fully understand liberal theology but tend to view the newly converted intellectuals and liberals as theologically liberal, rather than as classically liberal in the sense of social advocacy.

There is a third group of churches that chooses to be passive. These churches may not be ignorant or have an erroneous fundamentalist theology but rather are burdened by much trepidation. Because China does not allow true religious freedom, these churches adopt a policy of withdrawal in order to survive. They stay away from social interactions and focus instead on order and stability within the church. Such churches feel uneasy whenever their members mention social issues because they do not want potential problems to disrupt their listless, but calm, church life. Newly converted advocates of liberalism are considered disruptive and often "exhorted" to leave their ideological inclinations at the door.

Advocates of liberalism are obviously as "happy as a fish in water" when they step into the first type of churches. If they can be disciplined to commit to the ministries of the gospel in these churches and be transformed in their thinking, their impact on society will no longer be the result of human effort but the fruit of the Spirit. Having said that, these churches need to be very mindful that their primary focus should always be the preaching of the gospel—not participation in public affairs. Churches respond to civic issues with the truth of the gospel and guide the society "*to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*" (Micah 6:8b).

Advocates of liberalism will quickly be disappointed by the latter two types of churches due to the wide gap between their expectations and reality. Not only do these churches already face a not insignificant number of problems, the faulty expectations of the newly converted advocates widen the gap even further. If not handled delicately, the chasm is likely to result in a clash. However, if handled with care, this can be an opportunity to bring the advocates into a deeper level of faith and to stimulate the church to know how to react to public debates with biblical answers.

### **Anti-Liberals' Attitude toward Christianity**

With reference to liberalism, China's urban churches ought not to overlook another group of people: individuals who possess advanced degrees from universities in Europe or the United States and are involved in research in humanism or social science. These intellectuals see the crisis that many Western nations face and therefore oppose China's movement toward Westernization. They consider Christianity, and in particular Protestantism, as the root cause of this crisis of modernism. Since liberalism is viewed as being a part of modernism, such intellectuals oppose both it and Christianity.

Because these intellectuals believe that Christianity brought forth modernism, which is then equated with liberalism, total rejection of all three is their only option. However, this way of thinking is only another example of the "Whig Interpretation of History." Even if modernism can be seen as a good thing, and even if its origin is related to Christianity, it is most certainly not Christianity's primary, intended objective. One ought not to conflate Christianity and liberalism. However, when advocates of liberalism enter churches, this misperception that the two terms are synonymous will only grow.

Liu Xiao Feng, who gained fame for introducing Christianity to China's intellectuals, has recently been gravitating toward Western Classicism and away from Christianity. Liu's shift took place while he was simultaneously being very critical of liberalism. In light of the fact that Christianity rose to prominence at the end of the ancient Classical period, and the fact that classical liberalism came out of the Protestant Reformation, how a person understands liberalism will influence his or her view of Christianity.

While some look to Western liberalism for a different way of thinking, others wish to discover new ideas in traditional Chinese philosophy. Examining Christianity from the standpoint of cultural comparison, such individuals want to establish the subjectivity and superiority of the Chinese culture. They study Christianity, but are definitely not Christians and may even be pleased with their non-believer status. One such scholar of Christian studies, who actively participates in festivities honoring Confucius, stated in an interview: "Most Christianity scholars in China in the 1990s were not believers of the religion, which I think very healthy. Western scholars may consider this rather strange, seeing how serious we study the religion and have mostly positive assessment of it. Yet we do not believe in it. But I think this is precisely the superiority of the Chinese culture." This quotation shows that such scholars do not genuinely listen to Christian doctrine—its teachings and theology—but rather only look at its usefulness for their own cause.

For these reasons, having a deeper understanding of liberalism will greatly benefit churches in China in caring for their flocks and defending the faith. To have a greater understanding of a movement or philosophy, one must examine its history. In response to the development of liberalism, Christian scholars have responded with a wealth of literature. Churches in China must use these literary resources to better handle liberalism with caution and care. Similarly, in order for Western literature to influence the East, translation and publication of such resources are of highest priority. As the churches in China make good use of these resources, they will be better equipped to inform and guide their churches.

*Wei Zhou is the founder of First Fruits Reading Society and the author of various articles.*

*Translation is by Alice Loh and Erick Loh.*

## Urban Churches in China: A Pentecostal Case Study

By Robert Menzies

One of the most striking features of contemporary China is the startling pace of its modernization, urbanization, and economic development. Strange as it may sound, this process of modernization and development may represent a major factor in creating a context conducive for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity.

Ryan Dunch, in a very perceptive article, notes that modernization does impact the religious makeup of a nation. However, he suggests that rather than “producing a straightforward decline in religion,” modernization tends to change its nature. More specifically, Dunch suggests that religion, as it meets modernization, tends to become more voluntary (rather than acquired at birth), individualized, and experiential. These shifts in turn force religious institutions to change accordingly. Dunch views the Pentecostal movement as especially well suited to minister to the needs of people in societies, like that of China, which are shaped by industrial market economies:

*Pentecostal movements, once routinely presented as reactions against modernity, are now being reevaluated as especially reflective of these forces, in their emphasis on the self, and in equipping their adherents, especially in the developing capitalist societies of Latin American and South Korea, with the “values of ascetic Protestantism....so essential for social mobility in a capitalist economy.”<sup>1</sup>*

Pentecostal doctrine and praxis were particularly appealing to indigenous Chinese Christians in the 1920s and 30s. Many Chinese were attracted to this new form of the Christian faith, “which preached good conduct, promised fellowship with divinity, afforded healing and exorcism and offered forms of worship that could be corporate or individual according to the circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> And, as Hunter and Chan recognize, “the religious revival of the 1980s suggests that these are still deep needs.”<sup>3</sup> It is not unreasonable to suggest, then, that the forces of modernization and urbanization have, in part, enhanced this sense of need. All of this indicates that China, like other societies being shaped by the forces of modernization and urbanization, represents fertile ground for the seeds of Pentecostal revival. The following case study supports this claim.

### The Li Xin Church

In March of 2014 I met with several leaders of a large, Pentecostal house church network. The Li Xin (*Zhong Hua Meng Fu* or China Is Blessed) Church was established in the early 1980s in Anhui Province. It has grown rapidly over the past 20 years and now has churches all over China. The founder and leader of the church, Uncle Zheng, shared with me his fascinating story.

Uncle Zheng became a believer in 1978 in his home village in Li Xin County of Anhui Province. His mother was sick and afflicted by a demon. His brother was also not well, and his father died of an illness when Zheng was 13 years old. Six or seven other sick people in the area had become Christians. They had no Bible and they were illiterate, but Christian stories and traditions had been passed down to them orally. This small group would often come and pray for Zheng’s mother. Zheng remembers that he liked this because when they came they would share their food with him. In those days he was often hungry.

This small group of believers had a strong influence on Zheng. He watched them as they prayed for his mother and worshipped together. They asked Zheng to help them understand some worship songs that they had received in written form. Since they were illiterate, they needed him to help them understand the content of the songs. As Zheng read the songs to them, he was touched by the message. These early events led to his conversion as a young, 16 year-old boy. Eventually, Zheng’s mother was also wonderfully healed and set free.

Zheng indicated that the church in those days was like the church in the book of Acts. They relied heavily on testimonies, miracles of healing, and the casting out of demons—and the church grew rapidly. He told of one lady who was baptized in a river near the church. She took a bottle with her and filled it with “holy water” from the river when she was baptized. She then took this water back to her husband, who was very sick, and told him to drink it. He did and was wonderfully healed. Zheng and the others said that they had many stories like this.

An important event took place in 1983. The police were pressuring Zheng to stop his church meetings and close down the church. Finally, he said that he would, but that he wanted to meet with the believers one last time. When he returned home, his mother, who at this time was still possessed by a demon, began to laugh in a loud, demonic voice. When Zheng heard this demonic laugh, which seemed to symbolize Satan’s triumph, he felt prompted by the Holy Spirit not to give up and close down the church. Zheng indicated that this was the beginning of a period of many miracles and rapid growth in the church.

The Pentecostal message, complete with an emphasis on speaking in tongues, came to the church in 1988. Two Christian brothers were released from prison after spending 15 years in a labor camp. Zheng noted that the earlier generation (1950s to 70s) of evangelists spent many years in labor camps; his generation (1980s and 90s) represented the “short-term” generation, because they only spent a few years in prison. These two brothers encouraged Zheng and his church to consider the role of speaking in tongues in their own worship and prayer lives. They also introduced them to a Romanian missionary, Brother Matthew, who brought to them the Pentecostal message of tongues as the sign of baptism in the Holy Spirit. They said from this point on, they began to emphasize the work of the Spirit and speaking in tongues.

Dennis Balcombe visited the church in 1988 and his influence was also significant. Uncle Zheng and his colleagues spoke of Balcombe’s ministry and influence with great appreciation. In fact, they began to receive Bibles in 1985 and this was largely due to the



Robert Menzies

ministry of Balcombe's church in Hong Kong.

The church began to grow rapidly and spread beyond the borders of Anhui Province beginning in 1990. A catalyst for this came in 1993. The police attempted to arrest Zheng and their efforts forced him into an itinerant mode of ministry. From 1993 through 2002 he traveled widely through many provinces, preaching and evading the police. Although Zheng stated that their church does not face strong opposition or persecution now, this earlier period was an important time of church growth, stimulated by persecution. He noted that this was also the experience of the early church in Acts.

### The Urban Church

I asked Zheng and the other leaders how they would compare the church today with the church of the earlier years (1980s). They said the church of the early years was largely a village church and the gospel moved from the villages to the cities. Now, they said the church is taking root in the cities, and the gospel is now moving from the cities to the villages. They feel that this transformation of the church from a largely rural context to a largely urban context is a part of God's plan. While they noted that the village church emphasized spiritual life while the urban church highlights spiritual gifts, they also observed that some in recent years are not as committed as those in the early years. However, generally, they feel that the church today is vital, committed, and strong. In fact, they noted the parallels with the growth of the church in the book of Acts: the church began with uneducated fishermen like Peter, but, as it spread into the Gentile world, God used an educated man like Paul to help it expand. So also in China: God used illiterate villagers to establish the church; now he is using university graduates to take the gospel to those in the cities and beyond. They noted that their church now emphasizes planting churches among university students in the cities because they see this as the future of China's church.

Zheng viewed the early days when they did not have a Bible and people experienced miracles in a way that might be viewed as superstitious, in a positive way. He noted that in those days, "We did not begin our presentation of the gospel by talking about sin and the need for forgiveness." These were concepts that the villagers would not readily understand or feel significant. Rather, they began by talking about Jesus' power to heal and to free people from demonic bondage. In time, people came to understand other elements and implications of the gospel, but this was God's way of reaching down and touching people at their point of need. I found this striking for it reminded me of the ministry of Jesus. Zheng and his colleagues did not view the focus on the miraculous as superstitious; rather, they understood these experiences as God graciously accommodating his work to their situation and needs — a divinely inspired contextualization of the gospel.

I expected that they might say that today in the urban centers their approach is quite different; however, they did not. When I asked if they continue to emphasize praying for the sick and casting out demons today, they looked at me with faces filled with bewilderment. How else would you present the good news of Jesus? Even though the cognitive aspect of their message is undoubtedly more pronounced when communicating with the university students than with the villagers, they still maintain a strong emphasis on the reality of God's power and encountering him in a personal and tangible way.

Thus, it is not surprising that Zheng and the others have a favorable view of the church today. They highlighted that their churches continue to emphasize and experience the Holy Spirit's power and gifts, such as speaking in tongues. Zheng put it his way: "While we believe that the apostles are gone (limited to the twelve), the Spirit of the apostles is still the same." He also said that, "Acts is the pattern for the mission of the church. If the church does not follow the path of the early church, we will lose our way."

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing," in Stephen Uhalley, Jr., and Xiaoxin Wu, eds., *China and Christianity* (London: East Gate/M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 215 (citing Andrew Walker, "Thoroughly Modern: Sociological Reflections on the Charismatic Movement from the End of the Twentieth Century," in *Charismatic Christianity: Sociological Perspective*, 36).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism*, 140.

*Robert Menzies, Ph.D., is an adjunct professor at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in the Philippines and the current director of Synergy, an organization that seeks to enable rural village people in southwest China to live fruitful, productive lives. He has taught at Bible schools and seminaries in numerous countries and authored several books on the work of the Spirit, including Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience (co-authored with his father) and Pentecost: This Story Is Our Story. For the past 20 years Dr. Menzies and his wife, have lived and served in China. They have two married daughters.*



# Eschatology and China's Churches

By Li Jin

At the end of 2012, some international news media sources (such as BBC) as well as some mainland Chinese official media sources reported that over 1000 followers of the Almighty God sect (also called Eastern Lightning) were arrested due to promulgating both the imminent end of the world and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the "Great Red Dragon." This concept of Christian eschatology has rarely been raised by China's official media since 1989 and, of course, it is a negative and scornful view. Following the Chinese government's suppression of *Falun Gong*, the Almighty God sect became the largest religious organization in the public sector open to challenge by the political power of the CCP. Because it has also been labeled a cult (*xiejiao*) by the Chinese government, followers who openly identify themselves with the Almighty God sect are considered to be illegal.



[Urban Life, Beijing, China by Nick Piggott, on Flickr](#)

The teachings of this sect divide the entire history of mankind into three periods: "the age of law" in which God rules; "the age of grace" in which Jesus rules; and the final and current age, "the return of the female Christ" who rules in the final kingdom age. In the third age, to overcome the "Great Red Dragon" (identified as the CCP) is to realize the kingdom of Almighty God.

After it began in 1990, the Almighty God sect presented many challenges to the doctrine of the Christian faith. In terms of eschatology, there are some common features between it and many local Chinese Christian convictions, namely, a specific type of dispensationalist eschatology. This article attempts to plainly sort out some of the intellectual history and theological qualities of the eschatology of the Chinese church in order that we might better understand the Chinese cultural background behind Christian eschatology.

## Characteristics of the Chinese Church's Dispensational Premillennialism

In the traditional Chinese Christian faith, eschatology points out the differences between it and Chinese Christian sects and cults. The early house churches (*jiating jiaohui*) that emerged in the late 1970s, had their own view of eschatology—a kind of unique dispensational premillennialism. According to a 1998 document known as the "Statement of Faith of Chinese House Churches," drafted by China Gospel Fellowship, the *Fangcheng* network, and other unregistered church representatives, "The saints and Christ will reign together for a thousand years. In this thousand year period, Satan will be thrown into the bottomless pit. At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be released temporarily to deceive the nations until Satan is thrown into the lake of fire. Then, Christ will sit on the throne to judge all nations and all peoples. Everyone will be raised from the dead to stand trial before the judgment seat."

The eschatological theology held by these house-church networks and the Almighty God sect share a common source of influence from Watchman Nee and the theology of the Little Flock (*xiao cun*) sect that he established. Watchman Nee's theology was influenced by the mysticism of Jeanne Guyon and by Plymouth Brethren figures such as John Nelson Darby. In his work, *The Orthodoxy of the Church*, Watchman Nee considers the seven churches in the book of Revelation to represent the history of mankind at seven different periods of time. The current church is in the final era of the Laodicean age. In varying times, different churches have acted as spiritual representatives of the era. Witness Lee regarded Watchman Nee as the representative of this modern era. In his book, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, Witness Lee stated that: "Brother Nee, as a unique gift of the age given by the Lord to his Body for his move of the recovery on the earth, should be considered as a seer of the divine visions in the present age according to what he had seen of the divine revelation." Watchman Nee saw twelve such most mysterious revelations while at the same time "Brother Nee was not only a seer of these divine visions, but also a pioneer in the experience and enjoyment of the contents of all these divine visions."

At present, in the official Three-Self Church theology, eschatology lacks a working category and finds itself situated under communist ideology. Any form of eschatology appears to be a threat to the ideology of the government authorities. In addition to witnessing this in the suppression of Eastern Lightning, it can also be seen from the government's suppression of *Falun Gong*. In its third edition of the August 4, 1999 issue, *People's Daily* published an article on the perspective of *Falun Gong* and eschatology by Bishop Ding Guangxun, at that time the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Vice Chairman, also the Honorary Chairman of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee, and the Honorary President of the China Christian Council. Ding stated: "He (*Falun Gong* leader Li Hongzhi) agitates for eschatology and exaggerates the impending end of the world, which is incompatible with and in opposition to patriotism and constructing socialism. Eschatology is a poisoned arrow, weakening the uplifting spirit of the Chinese people and weakening the unity of the people." In January 2002, a speech by Three-Self Patriotic Movement committee chairman, Luo Guanzong, was published on pages four through nine of the first edition of the official China Christian Council *Newsletter* (*huixun*). In his speech, Luo writes that the Three-Self Church "does not give enough attention to theological issues. Moreover, the influence of those from beyond our borders who utilize Christianity to infiltrate [China] leads to false theology that rises to the surface. This manifests in a denial of this current life, leading to exploration of eschatology, using 'belief and unbelief' to divide people, believing love of faith and love of country are in contradiction, using the 'extra-political' to weaken or even deny the feeling of adoration for our socialist motherland, to deny rational thought, and even cause what is politically right and wrong to become indistinguishable. Therefore we all feel the need to begin constructing theological thought." Under the current intensification of media censorship in China, this is not an incidental phenomenon. Not only is this the case within the Three-Self Church, but the same is found in national propaganda as well.

## Gnostic Roots in Dispensational Eschatology

Post-communist ideology is not unaffected by eschatology. To the exact contrary, Marxism and the CCP's official ideology both contain a kind of optimistic millenarianism. China, under the rule of the Communist Party, has already completed its historical task. Its eschatological hope of a coming new world has transformed into the renovation of this world. This type of millenarian view, namely one that an era corresponds to the prophet of that era, produces a new type of person. Marxism contains this type of theological origin which is Gnosticism. Political philosopher Eric Voegelin wrote a very sharp analysis of dispensational eschatology as the source behind Gnosticism. For Voegelin, modern Gnosticism inherits the thoughts of Joachim. The eschatology of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135 – 1202), the most significant Gnostic thinker, served as a link between past Gnostics, such as Marcion, and future Gnostics. He creates the symbolism of self-interpretation for modern political society. There are four symbols in modern Gnosticism: the first is the three-realm division of history; the second is the "Leader"; the third, the new prophet as a representative of the age; and the fourth, the brotherhood of autonomous persons. Voegelin points to some significant thinkers and events as representatives for modernity, including Comte, Hegel, Shelling, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as many modern intellectuals and social movements. Many of these thinkers follow the thoughts of Joachim so closely that their use of the divisions of history appear very similar, such as noted in Voegelin's observation "Hegel's dialectic of the three stages of freedom and self-reflective spiritual fulfillment; the Marxian dialectic of the three stages of primitive communism, class society and final communism; and finally, the National Socialist symbol of the Third Realm."

Although the CCP and the Almighty God sect present different views of eschatology, in fact, they share a common source of theological understanding; that is, they alone have the truth and are the representatives and prophets of the current age. For the Almighty God sect this figure is undoubtedly the "female Christ," while for the Communist Party it is their own power. This urge to create a new world gives us a new perspective to understand why, before 1949, there were so many members of the YMCA who defected to the Communist Party in *Yan'an* to become senior cadres. For example, former Communist Party of China Central Committee member, Yun Daiying, attended a 1917 YMCA camp and was deeply moved. During that time, the apostolic model of "resource sharing" [common ownership] advocated by China's homegrown Christian sect, the Jesus Family, and the Communist Party slogan raised at the same time, were almost identical.

## Eschatology and Chinese Society

Because of the limited space of this article, a detailed explanation of Chinese eschatology is not possible here. However, we can see that in China different sect's eschatological views dictate people's religious lives. In secularized society, eschatology emerges as a form of panic, such as in the case of the 2011 nuclear leak in Japan that caused masses of Chinese to spontaneously rush to stock up on large quantities of salt and other supplies. Within the government, preservation of political rule prohibits discussion of the end times; however, in its ideology, the government reflects a variation of Gnostic thought that views the Communist Party as the representative of the new world following the *eschaton*. Suppressed religions and Communist ideology share this common theory: in the new age, the rich redemptive task of the sect (whether it is *Falun Gong* or the Almighty God sect) turns into that of initiator in the new age.

With regard to the church in China today, one of the most important questions we face is: What is a biblically orthodox eschatology and, more importantly, how do we preach this kind of eschatology in our churches? This question not only concerns our future but also determines how we live today.

*Li Jin is a theological student at Calvin Theological Seminary. Prior to seminary he was a PhD candidate in economic history at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics.*

*Translation by ChinaSource.*

## View from the Wall

### Public Theology in China: Some Preliminary Reflections

By Promise Hsu

In the Chinese-speaking world, the Christian church is widely known as “基督教会” (pronounced as *jidu jiaohui*). It appears that “教会” (*jiaohui*) is the Chinese equivalent of “church” in English. However, these two words do not share the same meaning. In the Chinese language, *jiaohui* literally means religious assembly while in the daily life of modern China it refers to a Christian assembly. The English word “church” originates from the Greek, *kuriakos*, meaning “of” or “belonging to a lord,” especially the Lord, Christ.

In the Greek version of the New Testament, it was mainly *ekklesia* that would be translated as “church” in English or *jiaohui* in Chinese. Basically, *ekklesia* means assembly. Its principal use in classical Greece was an assembly of city-state citizens. Apparently, the Chinese term *jiaohui*, or *hui* in particular, reflects more directly the Greek meaning of “assembly” than the English word “church.”

However, upon a closer look at the Chinese social and political context, one would see there is a significant difference between the Chinese *hui* and the Greek *ekklesia*. Historically, China did not have anything like the ancient Greek city-state assembly of citizens or its successive forms of civil governance in the West. Only within the last couple of centuries did the Chinese begin to learn from the West about free and democratic political order under the rule of the law.



鴻德堂 by Steven Yu, on Flickr

#### Christianity with Chinese Characteristics

With different social and political backgrounds, Christian assemblies in China and the West, unsurprisingly, took on different characteristics. In today's China, both the state-run Protestant church and its Catholic counterpart are part of the religious department of the centralized communist authorities. Their official names are, respectively, the Christian Three Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops Council. In spite of these authorities, specific, local, official churches may have some freedom of self-governance. This might be due to the local government's tolerance, the mutual acquiescence between the government and the official church, or the area's being too far away from the authorities. All of this is under the one umbrella of the Chinese communist government's policy known as the “United Front,” where the non-communist parties or organizations of various kinds are allowed to exist as long as they accept its paramount leadership.

The non-state-run church, commonly known as the house church, is a wide range of voluntary Christian organizations not officially sanctioned by the Chinese government. These have been called China's largest non-governmental organizations. With the nationwide growth of private enterprises since the 1980s, the much unexpected rise of house churches, first in rural areas since the 1980s and then in urban areas since the 1990s, has contributed remarkably to the emergence of civil society in communist China. However, its impact on the larger Chinese society remains much less than the impact of the dominant Chinese culture on house churches or other non-governmental organizations.

For house churches, the persistent lack of an officially sanctioned status under the rule of law makes it difficult for them to open up to the wider society. Of course some, like *Shouwang* Church in Beijing and Early Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu, have become somewhat well known over recent years among Chinese Christians and in the international media for their open position towards the state as well as the general public. Meanwhile, they, and similar churches in China, have also become equally well known—or even better known—for government harassment in various forms. Historically, persecution by the authorities appears to have been unavoidable. While it may have been positive for purifying the church from corruption, it does not necessarily seem beneficial to the church's further growth.

The persistent lack of open government, in areas other than just certain economic sectors, makes it difficult for people in the church to be very different from the general population. It has been more than thirty years since the late 1970s when China's communist government initiated its reform and opening up policy; nevertheless, the combination of traditional Chinese state-family or family-state rule and the totalitarian communist ideology of party-state continues to exert considerable influence. The worship of power seems to persist in permeating all walks of life. In society, it might be the worship of powerful people in government, business, entertainment, or education. Within the church, it might be that of influential ministers. Christians are influenced by, and must still live within, their society.

#### Christ in China

Against this background, the Christian church in China is facing huge challenges—but this does not mean that the Head of the church is not in charge or that China is an exception. The Head of the church, Christ, is also “...the head over every power and authority....And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:10b, 15). As part of Christ's body, the church in China is a witness to the biblical fact of God's rule in this world; un-

like the rulers of this world, "...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

The church in China is part of God's promise through Christ when he said he would always be with his followers when they would "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19, 20). In this regard, the church in China is among "Christ's ambassadors" by whom all people in China and the wider world can be reconciled to their Creator according to his promise, and live on as citizens of God's everlasting kingdom that has been at hand but has not yet fully come.

So, Christians in China are first of all citizens of God's eternal kingdom, and then, for now, citizens of China, a long-standing but still temporary country like any other of this world. Western missionaries and their early Chinese followers were pioneers in helping introduce the Chinese people to both the citizenship of the heavenly country and that of modern China. However, much more needs to be done. The tension between these two citizenships is not very evident in either the history of Christianity in China or that of modern China.

For those who highlight heavenly citizenship, God's redemption of those belonging to their Creator through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is conspicuous, but the redemptive life seems to be more about moral ethics in this world and fails to demonstrate the tension between eternity and temporality. As citizens of this world, they seem to have failed to live very much in the larger context of citizenship of the eternal world. The dynamic brought by Jesus Christ, who as both fully divine and fully human mediates between God and man, has not been as noticeable in the Chinese Christian world as in the West.

For example, it was Western missionaries who built almost all the first, modern institutions of higher learning in China. Their most influential ideas turned out to be about how to modernize China. Some who could not fully agree with such ideas left, establishing theological seminaries where the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and his resurrection figured prominently. In a sense, the former helped shape the modernization drive in China since the late nineteenth century, and the latter helped shape the movement of the independent Chinese church and later the house church. The former was basically deprived of Christian eschatology which was replaced with the messianic promise virtually within this world. The latter stayed with biblical apocalypticism but seemed not to have much to say about its relevance in both the broader and more specific areas of life. In both, the relationship between the eternal and temporal worlds was much reduced.

### **Opening to the Triune God**

With the insufficiency of maintaining the tension between the two worlds, the Trinitarian order revealed through God becoming flesh is lacking attention in the Chinese Christian world. Anyone made in the Creator's image cannot live out his image without the Creator's revelation and redemption. The three persons of one essence of the Trinity—both one, yet many—is quite unlike the common, human, governing order where either one or many will be preferred instead of both simultaneously. The Son of Heaven in traditional Chinese dynasties, rather than the Son of Man of the Scriptures, has cast a long shadow over the popular Chinese impression of authority. Even in contemporary China, the head of any institution tends to be a paramount figure which makes it difficult to develop checks and balances between that individual and other associates and colleagues. It is no surprise then, for the Chinese to be more familiar with the monopoly of power than with the sharing or separation of power. By contrast, the separation of power was clear in Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. This has also been true in Western church history. In addition, it has been relevant to the division of labor which is important for the potential full-blown growth of the different parts of the body of Christ.

The history of Christianity in China is long. The year 2015 marks the 1,380<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first recorded arrival of Christian missionaries in the country, with Alopen, a Nestorian bishop, being the best known. Barely 20 years after his arrival, in A.D. 635, the Tang dynasty, perhaps the most powerful Chinese dynasty and known for its opening-up policy to the outside world, was founded. That was just a few decades after Augustine of Canterbury, "the Apostle of the English," arrived in Britain in 597.

However, nearly fourteen centuries after the introduction of Christianity to China, its development seems to have remained in an early stage within the country. Part of the reason for this may lie in the fact that like China itself, the Christian church has not been able to be more fully connected with the outside world, especially with the Catholic or ecumenical church in the West. Resources for the continual growth of the church have been prone to be confined to just China or the larger Chinese-speaking world. Now with increasing opportunities for international contacts—at least for a while—and drawing closer to the end of this world, perhaps it is time for Chinese Christians, as members of Christ's body in China, to more actively seek the rich nourishment of growth from what the triune God has been doing in all aspects of life—to live both as citizens of this world and in the larger context of citizenship of the eternal world.

*Promise Hsu is an independent journalist and scholar based in Beijing and a member of the American Political Science Association. His articles have appeared in both English and Chinese journals. Previously, he was a world affairs journalist at China Central Television's English news channel. Since February 2015, he has been a visiting scholar at Calvin Theological Seminary. His first book, China's Quest for Liberty: A Personal History of Freedom, will be published by St. Augustine's Press in September 2015.*



## Book Reviews

### Scriptural Devotionals of God at Work in China

Reviewed by Peter S. Anderson

*Making Pentecost Your Story: 50 Days of Reflection and Prayer*, Robert Menzies, Xanesti Creative Solutions, 2015. Kindle edition or wireless download from Amazon for \$2.99, 190 pages (estimate). ASIN (Amazon Standard Identification Number): B00VCUS3J2.

Dr Menzies' *Making Pentecost Your Story: 50 Days of Reflection and Prayer*, designed as a devotional companion volume to his book, *Pentecost: This Story is Our Story*, begins with a brief but very helpful overview of the church in China. Menzies speaks with credible firsthand evidence and accurately points out that the house church movement, in particular, is strongly Pentecostal in flavor. He states that the "*Pentecostal faith is rooted in the Bible and flows from the conviction that the stories in the book of Acts are our stories: stories that provide models for life and ministry.*"

The daily devotional readings cover seven weeks (Sunday through Saturday), each day beginning with a well-chosen Scripture passage. A short story follows, based on Dr Menzies' own experiences. Over many years, he has obviously had many very interesting contacts with Christians in China. He records valuable lessons learned from his interaction with all kinds of people including leaders in various house church networks. These often moving personal stories give an accurate and balanced picture of what believers in China have experienced in the past, and what they experience today. Menzies also tells stories of how people from various backgrounds have come to faith—great snapshots of God at work in China. In several of his devotionals, Menzies quotes from the songs of Xiaomin, the well-known house church hymn writer. Along with each story, Menzies seeks to bring home a relevant application for the reader and then concludes with a final prayer—all truly excellent.

Preachers looking for a China-related illustration to include in a sermon would find the index of Scripture verses at the end very helpful as Menzies obviously chose the Scripture passages to fit with his stories. The tone of the devotional is truly uplifting and challenging.

Undoubtedly, most believers in China believe the Holy Spirit is very much at work today as he was in the book of Acts. The vast majority of Chinese believers are certainly not "cessationists," but this does not mean the majority are "traditional" Pentecostals either. Menzies admits that, although the leaders of one of the major house church networks claimed to be Pentecostal in outlook, a survey of 20 students in one of their seminaries revealed only seven viewed tongues as a sign of Spirit baptism while only nine said tongues occurred in their churches often or occasionally.

At the start of each week of readings, stories and prayers, Menzies has a section with questions relating to his book, *Pentecost: This Story is Our Story*. He asks many important and challenging questions, but his occasional (to my mind) over-emphasis on speaking in tongues was, for me, the only slightly negative aspect of this otherwise excellent devotional. I highly recommend it.

*Peter S. Anderson, former International Director of Jian Hua Foundation (JHF) and now Representative-at-Large for JHF, has worked with the Chinese for 40 years. He is a guest lecturer at Carey Baptist College in Auckland, New Zealand and pastor of Mairangi Bay Community Church.*

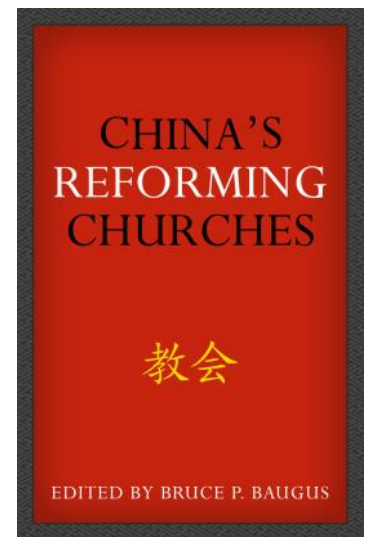
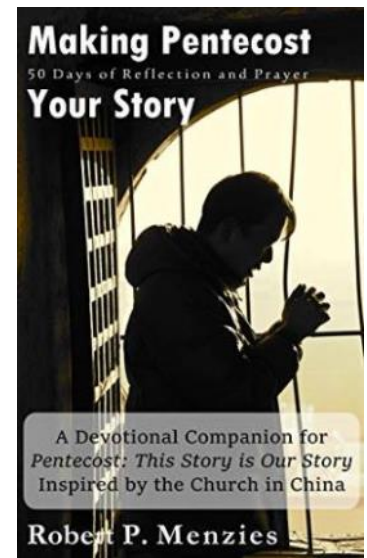
### Building up China's Church

Reviewed by Jennifer Guo

*China's Reforming Churches*, Bruce P. Baugus. ed., Grand Rapids, MI, Reformation Heritage Books, 2014, 320 pages. ISBN-10: 1601783175; ISBN-13: 978-1601783172; Paperback \$17.98 at Amazon.

For Christians with a passion for missions, China is on center stage. We certainly recognize this strategic mission field of approximately 1.35 billion people, and tremendous evangelistic fruit is being seen as a staggering number are becoming Christian daily. While fervent evangelistic efforts surely need to continue, especially since many of China's minority groups are considered unreached/unengaged, the astounding growth rate of the church poses critical and urgent needs in relation to church development. In this area, *China's Reforming Churches* is a unique book in that it focuses more on ecclesiology than missiology, more on building up the church than on evangelism (though of course these are connected). "Indeed, the proper goal of the church's mission has never been just to announce the good news to those who have not heard or to call unbelievers to faith and repentance; the church's mission also includes establishing a well-ordered church in every land for the welfare of God's people and perpetuation of the ministry" (17).

More specifically, the particular ecclesiology espoused in this book is the presbyterian\*/ Reformed variety. *China's Reforming Churches* is written from the conviction that the need for church development in China is largely the need for the development of a healthy and robust presbyterianism through an understanding of a biblical theology of the church as articulated within the Reformed tradition. As such, this book has a narrow focus and target audience. I have read some reviews criticizing this narrow focus and as-



serting that this book would be more helpful and have a wider audience if it were not written from this perspective; however, the focus and perspective were intentional and therefore cannot legitimately be criticized. This narrow focus is actually what drew me to this book; general books about mission work in China abound, but I am not aware of any other book that looks at the reformation that is going on in China. In fact, I did not even know that such a reformation was underway!

*Reformed theology is being disseminated and embraced throughout China; Reformed confessions of faith are being translated or written and adopted; new attention is being paid to worship, preaching, and leadership; local congregations, and in a few cases entire networks, are being organized or reorganized along presbyterian lines; Reformed seminaries are being established throughout the country; a Chinese presbyterian polity has been drawn up; presbyteries are being formed in various places and are in communication with one another; ministers are being trained, examined, and ordained; and the great works of the Reformed tradition are being brought into open circulation. All of this is just the beginning of an attempt by Chinese pastors and church leaders to meet the needs of God's people and lay a firm foundation for the future. Despite their vigorous efforts, every one of them "would agree that the church is struggling to keep up with the demand for trained leaders and other resources" as the gospel continues to spread and grow in the world's largest mission field (Baugus 22-23).*

The above quote is likely to shatter many people's conception of Christianity in China. Typically the church in China is primarily thought of as a persecuted church where non-registered house churches have no freedom to congregate and practice their faith, and where unthinkable physical persecution is the norm and not the exception. Therefore, presbyterianism (or any highly formalized training or organization, for that matter) is often not thought of as possible in China. However, *China's Reforming Churches* frequently corrects common erroneous presuppositions and reveals that within China there is a surprising amount of freedom for Christians and even for the officially illegal, unregistered churches. It may be an entirely different story when foreigners are involved, and the book goes into more detail about that.

*China's Reforming Churches* is an excellent survey of presbyterianism in China—from its history (part 1), to the current landscape (part 2), to challenges and opportunities (part 3), and to how China's reforming churches are appropriating the Reformed tradition in their context (part 4). Birthed out of a conference of Presbyterian and Reformed Christians interested in presbyterianism in China, the content in this book is from a combination of fine American scholars and Chinese reforming pastors. *China's Reforming Churches* provides much valuable insight into China in general, as well as what God is doing there in a general sense. With the awareness that this book is from a presbyterian perspective, any Christian with an interest in the church in China would benefit from this book, though non-presbyterians will disagree with its fundamental driving conviction. However, those who identify with the Reformed tradition in any way would find this book most enjoyable, beneficial, and encouraging. *China's Reforming Churches* is essential reading on missions and ecclesiology in China from the Reformed perspective.

\* Presbyterianism is written with a lowercase "p" in this review because of the distinction made in the book between the simple institutional form of church outlined in Scripture and particular Presbyterian traditions/denominations (indicated by capital "P") that apply the basic principles of presbyterianism.

This review appeared in an earlier version on Jennifer Guo's blog at <https://jenniferguo.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/book-review-chinas-reforming-churches-mission-polity-and-ministry-in-the-next-christendom/> and is used with permission.

Jennifer Guo, M.S., is a Chinese-American professional who will be starting a Master of Divinity degree at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School this fall. You can follow her on Twitter [@jenniferguo](https://twitter.com/jenniferguo) and check out her personal blog at [jenniferguo.wordpress.com](https://jenniferguo.wordpress.com).

## Intercessory Notes

*Please pray*

1. For Christian churches in China as they develop their theology and especially their ecclesiology.
2. That believers in China will understand the relationship between the eternal and temporal worlds and learn how to live as Christ-followers not only as citizens of China but also as citizens of God's eternal kingdom.
3. That as churches search out biblically orthodox eschatology, they will also understand how to preach this eschatology in their churches—so that believers will know how they should live in today's world.
4. For China's churches as they assess liberalism from a Christian perspective in order to inform and guide their people and for wisdom as they deal with any tensions that may arise.

