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China's Registered Church

One Body, One Spirit, One Hope

Wayne Ten Harmsel,
Guest Editor

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CHINASOURCE

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ChinaSource Quarterly **Autumn 2020, Vol. 22, No. 2**

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EDITORIAL

Opening the Doors a Bit Wider

By Wayne Ten Harmsel, Guest Editor

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). This is the name of the Chinese government oversight agency for Protestant churches. It is also the name that refers to those Protestant churches that have registered with and report to the government. Also, as I discovered in many conversations with "Three-Self" pastors, it is a name that causes them difficulties. While outsiders see this name as pointing to government control of the churches, the pastors overwhelmingly view it as a sort of bridge that facilitates communication between the churches and the government, not for the purpose of control but for mutual benefit.

This name is made up of two parts. "Three-Self" stands for self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. According to some missionaries and many Chinese Christians from the late 19th century to the mid-20th, these three should be the focus of Christian missions. However, in China, that goal was never reached—at least not until the Communist government appropriated it to be used in a nuanced way to mean "no foreigners or foreign influence allowed." The other part of the name, "Patriotic Movement," carried the meaning that love of country was above love of God or religion.

From the early 1950s until the late 1970s, many political, theological, and moral mistakes were made by religious leaders affiliated with the Three-Self. One result was that most Christians gathered in illegal "house" or "family" churches. In the eyes of most of the world, the "Three-Self" churches were ignored as irrelevant or condemned as false. They slowly drifted into obscurity. Lately however, the registered church has been waking up. With at least 70,000 churches and at least 30 million believers, they can hardly be ignored. This issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly* provides an updated and objective perspective on the registered church today.

Carsten Vala leads off with his article, "The Three-Self Patriotic Movement: Divergent Perspectives and Grass Roots Realities." Vala says we need to answer two focal questions in order to understand the TSPM. The first: "Why do Christians today hold such starkly different views of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement association and its official churches?" The second: "Are the TSPM and its churches 'compromised,' as some house church leaders claim?" Vala believes we can find answers to these questions in the TSPM's history and contemporary situation. He argues that the religious oversight agencies have become weak. His use of the concept of the public transcript explains a number of otherwise puzzling behaviors on the part of TSPM pastors and leaders. Vala fears the current situation is not sustainable in the era of Xi Jinping. Overall, this is the best short treatment of the TSPM that I have read.

Jerry An's and Heather Haveman's excellent article turns our attention to technology, new media, and the church. They point out that the coming of the coronavirus has forced both registered and unregistered churches to adapt to new technologies. The authors identify two typical church reactions to new media: first, alienation, the idea that new technology is bad and should be avoided; or second, instrumentalism, seeing new media as simply a tool, neither good nor bad. An and Haveman suggest a third way—the church as a shaper of new media. Churches should not abandon new media when the church doors open again. In the post-pandemic era registered and unregistered churches will face many of the same challenges. New technology, if embraced, will help to meet the challenges.

Our third article comes from a background of field work in China. Lorraine Li spent nine years teaching in China, the biggest part of that time doing Sunday school training. The Sunday schools were often bastions of traditional teaching and most Sunday school teachers were recent converts and often the only Christians in their families. Li uses many personal anecdotes illustrating how she dealt with these situations by focusing on three questions: What is Sunday school? Why have Sunday school? How do we teach Sunday school?

Erik Bürklin gives us a more close-up and personal picture of the registered church. The author focuses on the registered church and its impact on society. The church's impact on society flows out of its character more than its actions. Bürklin identifies five characteristics of the church: Christ-centered, mission driven, gospel motivated, worship focused, and prayer committed. Overall, he describes the church as loving Jesus, loving the Word of God, and passionate about being a witness.

In this issue, Peregrine de Vigo reviews Kim-kwong Chan's book, *Understanding World Christianity: China.* He concludes that the book "represents a lifetime of service, listening, and observation, bringing out the multi-perspectival essentials of Chinese Christianity, and presenting the complex web of discoveries in a concise and clear format. Chan... provides thoughtful analysis of many key issues in Chinese Christianity today."

We also include a short excerpt from my upcoming book, *The Registered Church in China; Flourishing in a Challenging Environment* in the Resource Corner.

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The Three-Self Patriotic Movement:
Divergent Perspectives and Grassroots Realities

Carsten Vala

Image credit: A friend of ChinaSource.

Why do Chinese Christians today hold such starkly different views of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) association and its official churches? Are the TSPM and its churches "compromised," as some house church leaders claim? To answer these questions, it helps to return to the origins of the Three-Self idea, sketch how Communist victory led to the creation of the Three-Self association, and look at how grassroots official churches operate today.

The idea of congregational autonomy—self-propagation (or evangelism and church planting), self-governance, and financial self-support, the "Three Selfs"—was first raised by a nineteenth century missionary, Henry Venn,[1] who worried that foreign missionary boards had too much control over Chinese churches. The concept gained support in the 1920s during the Anti-Christian Movement, in the aftermath of the May 4th movement against foreign imperialism. It gained real institutional form when Protestant elites, who had been selected by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for their loyalty, established a national association in the early 1950s (alongside official religious associations for the four other "official" religions; Catholicism was deemed a separate religion).

From the founding of the TSPM in the early 1950s, clear signs indicated that the CCP was concerned about the political loyalties of Chinese Christians, Protestant and Catholic, because lay and professional religious people had strong friendships and financial ties to its enemy countries, the United States and European powers. In fact, archives from the 1940s note how a few outspoken Protestant pastors and Catholic priests then had vocally criticized the Communist takeover. So, when the Communist Party set up the five national religious associations, only the Christian associations were compelled to include "patriotic" in their organizational titles. This added to suspicions toward the newly formed TSPM among grassroots believers, congregations, and their church leaders, who faced hard decisions. Church leaders could choose to affiliate with and fall under TSPM (and thus CCP) authority or cease public worship or face imprisonment. Some chose imprisonment, such as house church "father" Wang Mingdao, who rejected the TSPM as compromised by its political alliance with the CCP. Others hoped for accommodation with the new regime and willingly signed on. Still others faced the intense public pressure and affiliated only after China entered the Korean War to fight the United States, when wartime rallies publicly compelled Protestants to sign loyalty oaths to the regime and the TSPM.

By the mid-1950s, however, TSPM-affiliated churches (or official churches) became increasingly politicized as Maoist rhetoric replaced traditional sermons and multiple churches were forcibly merged into a handful of congregations and denominational identities erased. For example, Beijing had more than sixty churches before the mergers; afterwards, fewer than five survived. Public worship attendance dwindled.

Internally, party-state officials staffed positions in the Three-Self association and closely monitored (and reported on) TSPM leaders, who organized conferences to pressure grassroots pastors to toe the shifting national CCP line. By the Cultural Revolution's outbreak in 1966, all churches were shuttered and Three-Self pastors, like other party-state officials, were forced to criticize each other and then were sent to the countryside or factories to do manual labor.

This brief history explains why older Protestants in the reform era view the TSPM with a range of attitudes—from hope to skepticism to fear—because it had served as an instrument of CCP repression among Protestants for the previous three decades. That legacy of persecution continued to haunt the memories of these Protestants for several reasons. First, despite the new Deng Xiaoping era's promise that the CCP would now accommodate religion, there had never been a reckoning with the past, much less a "truth and reconciliation" process to heal old wounds. Also, it was the same TSPM leaders who had led the Mao-era persecution (as well as suffered themselves) who regained their former positions. The older Protestants, outside the official churches, passed on their memories, of course, to new generations of Protestants in the house churches, sustaining a narrative of the TSPM, its churches, and its leaders as fatally compromised by political power.

TSPM Church Autonomy? Bureaucratic Structures and Current Realities

Is the TSPM and its affiliated churches a "tool to extinguish Christianity" as some house church leaders claim? Through this lens, a house church leader interprets every action taken by a TSPM leader that leads to inconvenience, hardship, or worse as evidence of the infidelity of the TSPM association or leaders to Christ. In reality, it is sometimes simply envy and congregational competition that spurs TSPM leaders to report a house church to authorities, resulting in harassment. Other times, TSPM pastors are implementing national directives—such as the 2002-2003 ban on all public gatherings during the SARS epidemic—which house church leaders cite as going against the Bible's injunctions to keep on meeting, further proof in their eyes of the compromised, political nature of official churches. More often, as I point out in my book, house church leaders mention the theological reform campaigns launched by TSPM leaders in response to CCP directives as evidence of their infidelity.[2] As Barthel notes in his thesis, in the 1990s and 2000s it was called "theological construction" to emphasize the possibility of reconciliation between the socialist system and

Protestant theology, whereas by the late 2010s and into 2020 and beyond it is taking the form of "Sinicization," the harmonization of Christian theology with traditional Chinese culture, as a way to channel and tame Protestant zeal.[3] Nearly any TSPM effort to promote theological change sparks suspicion and harsh criticism from some parts of the unregistered house church communities.

At the same time, the realities of the party-state and Chinese Protestant Christianity prevent the worst kind of regime intervention and monitoring. For one thing, there are far too many Protestant Christians for authorities to oversee all of them (this is one reason that TSPM leaders are tasked with such oversight). For another thing, the very bureaucratic structure of the regime's religious oversight and of the TSPM association makes strict control difficult. For example, religious affairs authorities are some of the lowest paid and hence least-motivated personnel in the party-state hierarchy. With low pay and morale, these officials have little incentive to carefully study religious policies that require making distinctions between traditional and cultish groups. Furthermore, they quickly find that strict policy enforcement can backfire because recalcitrant believers can generate public attention—even worse, *international* media attention—that gives China a bad name from any religion-state conflict. All of this means that religious affairs authorities prefer a laissez-faire attitude.

Second, organizationally, top TSPM leaders have limited power to enforce policies on grassroots congregations. From the outside, the TSPM association appears to be a strongly integrated, top to bottom organization in which national leaders can compel churches to implement new policies. In reality, the TSPM association is highly fragmented, with national leaders only able to pressure provincial- or city-level leaders who themselves are so busy that individual pastors under their watch often enjoy considerable degrees of freedom.

A third factor is that the lower one goes in the Protestant leadership hierarchy of the TSPM, the more leaders share values and perspectives that are similar to those of the house church leaders. This shared outlook is even more true among the younger generation of thirty- and forty-something church leaders, who never lived through the Maoist period (nor bought into its claims about foreign Christians' exploitation of China). This rising generation of leaders more frequently sees Christian foreigners as "brothers and sisters" of one faith.

This does not mean that grassroots pastors of TSPM churches do not experience official pressure at all. Indeed, on major holidays or other key events, local authorities may compel TSPM leaders and prominent church pastors to publicly demonstrate their loyalty and gratitude to the party-state. On such occasions, they dutifully parrot communist declarations, such as one leader did by announcing at a new church opening that Christians should "study the spirit of the party Congress." On another occasion, one after another Protestant leader echoed formulaic denunciations of American imperialism at an event celebrating the TSPM's founding. However, these are merely public performances, part of a "public transcript" that both authorities and church leaders know must be followed in public arenas. These performances should not be taken as proof of deep-seated convictions among TSPM Protestants (even if house church leaders insist that they reveal the "false" nature of the TSPM). Instead these savvy Protestants are merely satisfying the outward demands of party-state officials in spotlighted events, and by doing so they are mostly let alone to go about their business. So while the authorities bristle at public resistance to their power, they have long closed their eyes to the daily, private actions by such Protestants. In these ways, official church pastors have learned to satisfy local authorities' demands and continue with the core operations they deem essential: pastoring congregations, teaching and baptizing new converts, and training essential staff.

Thus, it is mainly in large cities, or in the most prominent official churches that pastors complain about persistent monitoring by TSPM superiors or state authorities (especially on particularly important holidays like Christmas or Easter), about control of congregational funds by TSPM association leaders, or about political background checks (for house church or foreign missionary ties) that hinder eager Christians from enrolling as state seminary students.

So what do TSPM (or official church) pastors do? After gaining entry to and graduating from an official seminary, they need to pass a second background check to be installed and ordained as a leader in a grassroots church. At that point, pastors are able to do a wide range of things: preach sermons, baptize new believers, organize church services, and so forth. Outside the public eye, many also train house church believers in their own training sessions, or collaborate with leaders on sending out missionaries (something that is strictly illegal but has expanded the church both inside China as well as across borders into Central Asia and elsewhere), or even by baptizing new house church believers. When government campaigns announce a new crackdown on cults or religious groups, these pastors have also sheltered house church leaders and their congregations from being rounded up by telling local government officials which house churches have orthodox beliefs. Local authorities typically trust TSPM pastors to distinguish orthodox (and politically "trustworthy") believers from "cultic" groups.

In very recent times, however, in the Xi Jinping era, this status quo has begun to breakdown. With the anti-cross campaign launched in 2013 to 2015 in coastal Zhejiang Province, the increasingly restrictive 2018 national regulation, and reports in recent months of TSPM and house church congregations being harassed and shut down, the Xi Jinping era constitutes a "new normal" in harassment and persecution. House congregations used to occupy a gray zone between official TSPM churches that were approved, and banned groups. But what we are seeing now appears to be concerted official pressure on both official churches and

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New Media and the Church:
How WeChat Changes the Dynamics between the Registered Church and Other Believers

By Jerry An and Heather Haveman

Image credit: A friend of ChinaSource.

As churches across China closed their doors in late January due to the developing coronavirus epidemic, the distinctions between registered and unregistered churches dwindled. Both had to shift quickly to new formats, adjust to new platforms, and adapt to being the church without the benefit of physical gathering.

Of course, Italy soon followed, and US churches were not far behind. However, the challenge to China's churches was especially profound and not just because they were the first. Rather, many of China's churches have long held strong views about the internet and so-called new media.

Traditionally, two macro-level views have dominated Chinese Christians' perspectives on new media: alienation (and its variant, dialecticism) and instrumentalism. The first of these, *alienation,* is the belief that the dangers of new technology outweigh the benefits, so it is better to avoid it altogether. Picture the early days of darkly lit internet cafes filled with young Chinese men playing video games all night long, and you get the idea of the kinds of dangers pious Christians might try to avoid. Similarly, *dialecticism,* a variant of alienation, sees the positive and negative influences as in constant tension, so that the only good option is to keep a safe distance.

Both alienation and dialecticism separate the church from current trends and development. Of course, few modern churches in China's cities hold to extreme alienation, resisting all forms of technology, but the mentality is a stubborn one. The deep-seated mindset of avoiding danger has a tendency to persist, rearing its head with each new technological development.

By comparison, *instrumentalism* offers some nuance to such an extreme posture, believing that technology and media are tools (or instruments) that can be used for either good or bad, depending on the user. From this perspective, technology can be quite useful for good when used by Christians with good intentions. Churches with active WeChat[1] channels and websites typically have this overarching mentality, appreciating the benefit that these tools can offer their congregations.

These two dominant views have never fallen along clear-cut lines. Rather, they crisscrossed the typical church divides of registered and unregistered, urban and rural, large and small. When all of China's churches were suddenly shutting their doors and adjusting to non-gathered worship, legality, geography, and size were not the only factors that determined their individual experiences. The church's willingness and adaptability to using new media for the work and mission of the church also played a significant role.

One Three-Self church in Xi'an is a good example of how these dynamics came together in the coronavirus age. Located in a relatively rural area, this Xi'an congregation is an aging one. Prior to this year, the church used very little media—church was a low-tech, in-person experience. Many in the congregation use so-called "old person mobile phones" (老人手机) which offer some modern functionality without access to the more advanced technology of social media apps like WeChat. Between the demographics of an older, more rural congregation and the established resistance to new media, this church had a hard time adapting to church online. When push came to shove, they found themselves defaulting to low-tech, traditional options like sending paper communications (such as a home liturgy), until they could get back to "normal" in person.

By contrast, one church in Dalian reported that they already had an active WeChat channel before the pandemic hit. Adjusting to church online still had its challenges, of course, but those challenges were tempered by the fact that they had legitimate, viable *tools*. Soon enough, their WeChat channel was populated by online worship with links to music and the pastor's sermons. Even small groups were able to continue thanks to the quick move to Zoom. Furthermore, the church actually increased the number of meetings each week, providing opportunities to connect online almost every night. One brother even admitted, "I've learned more during these months of lockdown than in ten years of being a Christian!"

While both of these churches did what they could in a difficult moment, perhaps neither posture is actually ideal. Not engaging media and technology means Christ's witness is absent from the digital world. However, seeing new media only as a tool to be used as a second or last resort (like when the coronavirus keeps you from gathering in person) means that the church will always be reactive rather than proactive in an age that is undeniably shaped by the internet, social media, and digital interconnectivity.

The mission of the church has always been proactive: it is a call to be and act as Christ's witnesses in this world, to evangelize and make disciples, to build God's kingdom here and now. Beyond alienation and instrumentalism there is another option: the church can be an active shaper (not just user) of new media as it embraces its calling to faithfulness in this unique era known as the digital age.

The digital age may seem highly developed and sophisticated, but new media actually challenges the church to return to the basics. New media is relational, experiential, public, and shared; so are the church's fundamental tasks of discipleship and mission. Yet new media also offers the opportunity to fulfill these tasks in newly creative and flexible ways, challenging the divide between digital and physical, virtual and real. As Christians, we are familiar with the tension of such divides because we live in it constantly, holding out for the heavenly realities that we cannot quite yet touch, see, or feel.

The Chinese church got a taste of both this tension and opportunity during lockdown, but the lifting of lockdowns does not erase the key characteristics of this age. Opening church doors does not mean we should leave WeChat and Zoom in the dust. Rather, the church must glean from this season's brief experiences to press more fully into the relevance and effectiveness of the church's mission in the new media age.

As churches do this, the divides that once defined the church in China begin to blur. Registered and unregistered churches faced similar challenges in the early days of lockdown, and they face shared possibilities in shared spaces online now. In substantial ways, WeChat levels the playing field. For example, an average Chinese Christian who attends a registered church on Sunday likely subscribes to their church's WeChat channel as well as to other channels providing Christian content. But once on WeChat, there is no clear distinction between registered and unregistered and no easy way to differentiate material along these lines.

The sheer volume of content available in the digital space changes the dynamics considerably. While a sister might previously have only heard messages from her own church, she now has content from a range of sources at her fingertips. Thus the church must cultivate critical thinking and discernment among believers, since information can no longer be managed or contained.

Similarly, social media has given today's youth the opportunity to participate in and meaningfully contribute to conversations online. For those who want a voice, old models of quietly learning from the pastor are not going to work. In the digital age, learning is multi-directional, fragmented, and experiential, so discipleship should be as well. In practical terms, the youth are often better at running the church's technology and social media outlets which gives them hands-on experience and opportunities to contribute in a meaningful way. This is truly integrated discipleship for the digital age—but it is also public, shared, and fragmented discipleship. The pastor and other vetted voices are no longer the only ones forming the disciple.

As registered churches have come out of lockdown in the second part of this year, the *Lianghui*[2] has clearly defined the requirements for restarting, often running in-person inspections of the facilities before granting final approval. Likewise, when a new COVID-19 case is identified in an area, the *Lianghui* can require the church to close again at a moment's notice, as has happened in several cities already. Unregistered churches do not have this kind of clarity or invitation to open, but in these post-coronavirus months, the two once again share their experience: neither truly knows when church might have to go back online, with little warning, for an unknown length of time.

The truth is, new media adds substantial value in implementing the church's mission. As the months in lockdown have shown, the church's geographic and numerical reach increases significantly when done online. Connections are multiplied as Christians interact on WeChat and Zoom multiple times a week rather than gathering only on Sundays. Thus, the fundamental tasks and mission of the church—evangelism and discipleship—are actually possible.

The characteristics of the digital age are clearly here for the long haul, even if we do not know whether another wave of coronavirus cases will close churches. Given these realities, it is time for the church in China to creatively embrace and shape new media to reflect the purpose and mission of the church—not simply instead of gathered church, but in addition to. In so doing, the lines between registered and unregistered might just continue to blur. But that is not what matters. What matters is that, whether digitally or physically, gathered or online, in every way Christ is preached. In that we can rejoice!

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[1] WeChat is the most popular social app used in China.

[2] The closest English to *Lianghui* is probably "Two Committees" or "Two Organizations." It is made up of the China Christian Council (CCC) and Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) each of which has incarnations at the local, provincial, and national levels. For further understanding see https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/the-lianghui-and-registered-churches/.

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Heather Haveman spent more than six years living in Northeast China as both teacher and student. She now works for Back to God Ministries International's Chinese language ministry.

Sunday School Training in China

By Lorraine Li

Image credit: A friend of ChinaSource.

> *Start children off on the way they should go—and even when they are old they will not turn from it.* Proverbs 22:6

In the early spring of 2002, an American friend and I biked to a local church in Jinan where I was attending graduate school. My friend was invited to teach English to the Sunday school children and I would translate for her. As a foreigner, she was not allowed to teach any Sunday school lessons, but teaching English was approved by the authorities.

We parked our bikes in a narrow alley and entered the church through a metal gate. A pathway led between the church sanctuary on the right and offices in a bungalow on the left. Since we arrived in the middle of a service, we had to cut through people sitting on little stools on both sides of the pathway. We were headed to a two-story building at the end of the pathway. Climbing up the winding staircase, trying not to bump into boxes piled up on the side, we arrived at our destination, the Sunday school room on the top floor.

Opening the squeaking door, we saw a group of about ten children crouched on short stools, around two tables, listening to a teacher while taking notes. The teacher was speaking with a loud voice, making sure each student was able to summarize the lesson she had just given. She then led them in a long prayer in which each student was required to pray, in his or her own words, expressing sorrow for their sins and their love for God.

At that time, I was not yet a believer and had never set foot in a church before. This was my first experience of a Sunday school in China, and it left a lasting impact on me. Not long after I accepted the Lord as my personal Savior, I felt the calling to do something for these sincere, little ones. Later, I was admitted to Calvin Theological Seminary and majored in educational ministry.

When I returned to China after my seminary studies, God gradually opened doors for me to teach and train seminary students and church lay workers nationwide. As the churches in China were growing at an unprecedented rate, proper teaching and training of pastors and lay workers became an urgent need. Sunday school teachers were among those who were constantly seeking training materials and personnel. From 2009 to 2013, I had the privilege of offering Sunday school training to teachers in Three-Self churches in different parts of the country. Some of these were home churches of my seminary students and some were connections made through our work and through fellow brothers and sisters. These connections were made in the Three-Self setting where all of my training and teaching has taken place.

Just like everything else in China, it is hard to generalize and give a universal picture of what Sunday schools look like. The Sunday school classrooms I mentioned above had not changed much over the years I had been gone. However, because of my training classes, I also had the privilege of experiencing many other Sunday school settings in different parts of the country. Other than the fact that as TSPM churches they are all state-sanctioned, these churches were very different. Some were in large cities, like the capital city Beijing; some were in remote villages. Some had nearly 100 students over a wide age range that met in several classrooms; others had only a handful of kids confined in a dim tiny room. Some welcomed foreign teachers; others shunned any Western influence. Some had modern equipment, like computers and over-head projectors; others were barely sufficiently lit. Some had a teaching crew of college students, graduates, and young professionals; others had only a few grannies to look after the kids. Some churches assigned a pastor to have Bible studies and teaching sessions with these teachers on a regular basis; other churches only expected the kids to be kept quiet in a separate space during worship. Some churches were very creative in offering free singing and dancing lessons for children in the neighborhood as a way to evangelize; others were instructed to refer to the Sunday school as the nursery.

According to government policy, children under the age of 18 should not be evangelized. They are considered not mature enough to make their own decisions like adults do. Therefore, the size and format of Sunday schools depend largely on the local church leaders' interpretation of the government policy and their own preference as to how to react to demands of parents in their congregation.

Despite the wide differences they present, these churches and teachers do have a lot in common: they all share a deep love for Jesus and the children. Like what happened with me several years earlier, many new believers were zealous to serve the church right after their conversion—and Sunday school seemed to be a top choice for many, especially female believers. Despite the scarcity of available training as well as materials, they searched different venues, like the internet, to find resources. That was also part of the reason I was invited to many churches. Word of mouth spread when training was available.

Most of these teachers do not have much previous teaching experience, so they rely on their own experience of growing up as a student. Much of the teaching still follows the traditional Chinese method with a heavy focus on memorization, lecturing instead of

discussion, and moral lessons. One church had a room for middle school students. The room was set up like a typical Chinese classroom with four rows of tables, five tables in each row with two students, sitting on a long bench, sharing each table. The teacher lectured a good twenty-five minutes while the students buried their heads in their notebooks taking notes. Each student was required to keep a spiritual journal that was turned in weekly and "graded" by the teacher.

Besides classroom teaching, these teachers often shoulder heavy parenting responsibilities. As most of the parents are first generation Christians in their families, they have no experience of having grown up with Christian upbringing; thus, they have no clue how to bring up their children in a biblical way. On top of the many challenges of parenting in a changing world, learning about Christian parenting no doubt adds to their burden, one that they cannot carry alone. These parents often turn to pastors and Sunday school teachers for help. Many of them rely on Sunday school as the only place where their kids can be kept on a straight path.

A couple of weeks ago, I received a message from a friend in Beijing. "How do you think we could help kids at our church understand video games from a biblical perspective?" As a Sunday school teacher, she has constantly heard complaints and concerns from parents that their children are spending too much time on video games. While the kids see it as an entertainment to help them relax, the parents worry about the danger of addiction. Over my years of teaching and training in China, I have been asked many questions like this one.

It is these needs that have led to the structural design that my training has taken. I usually divide my training according to these questions: What is Sunday school? Why do we have Sunday school? How do we teach Sunday school? Besides child developmental psychology and teaching techniques, like class schedule and classroom management, I encourage them to think deeply about the meaning and goal of Sunday school. I challenge them to come up with their own philosophy of teaching after studying the biblical principles and assessing their unique setting. As a philosophy major and a critic of the traditional Chinese teaching system, I hope these questions and discussions will help them think outside the box and develop critical thinking that involves asking good questions instead of always expecting the correct answer from an "expert." As the Chinese saying goes, I hope to teach them how to fish instead of handing them the fish.

I also modeled the Montessori-based curriculum *Young Children and Worship*. Based on her experience in the Chinese Sunday school, the American friend I mentioned earlier, who is a life-long Christian educator, revised the curriculum and wrote her version for the Chinese church. I translated the curriculum into Chinese and an artist friend produced the illustrations. We made free copies of this curriculum to hand out at my training sessions. The teachers were often intrigued by this new way of teaching while also feeling challenged by the open-ended questions. Often times, they felt they were not really "teaching" the lesson if they did not provide the students with a moral summary at the end.

I would like to ask for your prayers for these Sunday schools and teachers. Some of them continue to serve in creative ways, and some are facing challenges as the political environment tightens. I have learned of churches where children are no longer welcome. Despite all the challenges and difficulties, I believe their love for Jesus and for the children will carry them a long way.

Lorraine Li holds a MA in Educational Ministry from Calvin Theological Seminary. She is currently the Coordinator of Christian Formation and Missions at First United Presbyterian Church of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Prior to her current position, she worked in China for nine years, teaching and training seminarians, church staff, and lay workers.

Opening the Doors a Bit Wider **Continued from page 2**

As Brent Fulton points out, we often gloss over the "vibrant dimensions of Christian life" evident in so many registered churches. We hope that the articles in this issue serve to open the doors a bit wider to see what God is doing.

Wayne Ten Harmsel is a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church who lived for a dozen or so years in Beijing, working with Chinese churches and pastors.

The Church in China: Making a Difference in Society

Erik Bürklin

Image credit: Mike Falkenstive, *One Catalyst.*

The church in China is a miracle. When you think of China you think of communism, of red flags, of big military parades in Beijing (such as last October for the 70th anniversary of the PRC) and we, as Christians, mostly think of it as a "closed" country to the gospel. But to God, no country is really ever closed, and the opportunities for the gospel to advance are endless. The church in China continues to grow, and believers are making a significant contribution to their society.

Most recently, with added restrictions implemented from the government, we have again heard reports of the "doors slowly closing." Crosses are being taken down from church buildings, churches have been forced to close down in some areas and, in some cases, have even been demolished and pastors imprisoned. Yet in the midst of all this, the church in China continues to flourish and new converts are joining the family of God all across China.

When we talk about the church in China, we need to identify two kinds. While the church is unified and worships Jesus as the head of the church, there are two different churches in China.

First, there is what is known as the Three-Self church—I prefer to call it the *registered* church—which has chosen to register its fellowships with the government to give it legal standing. As a result, these churches and their members are free to live out their Christian faith—believers may attend church services on Sunday mornings and Bible studies during the week, young people may attend seminaries and Bible schools to get equipped for ministry, and old people find care in senior living venues run by Christians. The government, for the most part, allows them to function openly and officially since they are recognized as legal religious institutions by the government.

Second, there is what many call the house church movement, also identified by some as the "underground church." These are the churches that have chosen not to register with the government to maintain a greater independence. As a result, members who attend these churches tend to have a harder time freely living out their faith, and their pastors are regularly questioned due to the fact that the government does not consider them legal religious institutions.

So, there is the registered church and the unregistered church. But most important—they are Jesus' church; the church in China belongs to him. What is most exciting is that Christians in China attend and are involved in both types of churches.

This article will highlight the ministry of the Three-Self church and identify how this church is having a positive influence in Chinese society.

The "three-self" principle was first coined in the late-19th century by various mission leaders with a strategy to establish indigenous churches. They believed that in order for a local indigenous church to truly flourish in a culture it has to have three principles. First is the principle of self-support, which means that a church needs to have a local congregation that financially supports it and is independent of foreign money. Second is the principle of self-governance, which means that a church thrives best when its leadership is governed by indigenous leaders and independent from any foreign involvement (i.e. missionaries). Third, the principle of self-propagation means the church depends on indigenous missionary work, declaring the gospel in its own cultural context to its own people.

How does the church have a positive impact on society in China?

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' *teaching and to fellowship,* to the breaking of bread and *to prayer.* All the believers were together and had everything in common. . . . They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved* (Acts 2:42-47).

This passage reminds me of the Chinese church and answers the above question. What happened in the New Testament church is what is happening in Chinese churches today. Here are some of the key characteristics that are making an eternal impact:

Christ centered: Wherever we go in China, we notice the Chinese characters on the church buildings read, "Christian Church." Pastors tell us with regularity, "Jesus Christ is the head of our church." At the same time, they have respect for authority; Chinese believers respect the governing authorities that God has placed over them. During all my travels in China over the last twenty years, I have always been amazed at how humble the Christians are in China. They keep focusing on one thing—Jesus Christ. They not only believe in but *live out* verses found in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. They completely submit to the authorities and at the same time honor Jesus as the head of the church. By doing this, they are a powerful testimony and are given amazing opportunities to share the gospel with unbelievers.

Mission driven: The main mission of the church in China is to preach the gospel and to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. "I preach inside, now you go out and preach outside," is what one pastor in Beijing encourages his congregation to do. Hundreds of new converts are being baptized yearly in his church and in thousands of churches across China.

Several years back I had the privilege of talking to a young Christian lady who told me that she uses her opportunity of traveling on the train to be a witness for Jesus. She said,"When I'm on the train going back home during Spring Festival (aka. Chinese New Year), I sit for twelve plus hours in my compartment with other travelers. Since they are stuck in the cabin with me, I use that opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with them." Christians in China are encouraged to go and preach the gospel wherever they are to as many people as possible."

Motivated to witness: A direct result of the church in China being "mission driven" is the fact that it motivates believers to be practical with their faith. Most believers are eager to share the good news with their neighbors and those they come in contact with. They are vigilant and passionate about their relationship with Jesus and share with their friends and neighbors the relationship they have with Jesus Christ.This is the miraculous story of the Chinese church, and this is the reason why the church is growing throughout that great country.

I remember the Beijing Olympics in 2008. In preparation for that event there was a discussion among the church leadership of the registered church regarding how they could participant in this global event. They came up with the idea of organizing welcome packs including an English translation of the New Testament that had been printed at the Amity Printing Company with the Olympic logo on it. The purpose was to be a blessing to the nations—the athletes, their families, media personnel, and visitors—who were descending on Beijing. I thought to myself, "How strategic; Western Christian organizations were trying to use the Olympics to bring the gospel to China while the Chinese Christian leaders and churches were using the Olympics to reach the whole world."

The Haidian Church, in the northern part of Beijing, built a brand-new church building in the university district with the specific purpose of reaching the younger generation in Beijing for Jesus Christ. On top of the building is a huge sign in English that reads, "CHRISTIAN CHURCH." There is no mistaking nor hiding it—this church is a Christian church declaring Jesus Christ as the son of God. One of the ways the pastors and leaders of Haidian Church are strategic in reaching young people is by having an English service. They understand how popular and desirable it is among the younger generation to learn and speak English. Every week hundreds of young people attend church services allowing them to hear the life-changing message of Jesus.

Worship focused: Chinese Christians love their Bibles; they always bring them to church and are eager to learn from them. Incidentally, the largest Bible printing press in world is found in Nanjing, China. The Amity Printing Company has printed over 200 million Bibles since 1987 when the factory was established. Believers in China also love to sing and worship through music. Most churches have choirs and/or praise teams, and congregations sing with enthusiasm and with all their hearts.

Prayer commitment: Most churches have cushioned areas near the pulpit where people can come to pray. Chinese Christians take prayer very seriously holding regular prayer meetings in their homes and other venues. They believe in the power of prayer.

We have had the privilege of working with the registered church for the last thirty years. They are men and women who love Jesus, love the Word of God, and are passionate about being a witness. Yes, the church in China is controlled by the government, but they continue to faithfully serve their Savior because they know that, ultimately, Jesus controls everything.

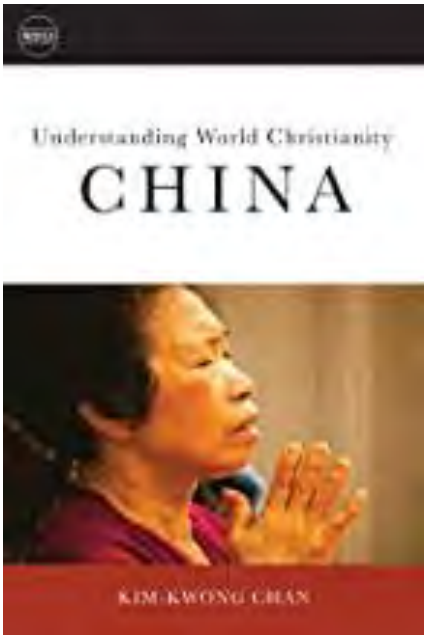
The Chinese church is an example of how Jesus is really the one who is establishing the church in the largest country of the world. As Jesus said to Peter two thousand years ago: "On this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). This is Jesus' promise. He said that *he* is the one who will build it. He said that it will be *his* church. This is not only what we see becoming reality in China, but we see the same phenomenon around the world. No matter what government systems are in place, Jesus' church will prevail. Not only will it prevail but, better yet, it will continue to grow. Hallelujah!

Erik Bürklin, MDiv, is a third-generation missionary whose grandparents served with China Inland Mission (now OMF) taking the gospel to China before it closed to foreign missionaries in 1950. In 1989, his father, Dr. Werner Bürklin, founded China Partner, and in 1993, Erik joined his father and then took over as president in 2001. He regularly travels to China organizing and teaching pastoral training seminars. In addition to training church leaders, China Partner provides Christian literature, links ministries and individuals outside China with churches in China, and partners with churches in China to reach the next generation. Erik and his wife reside in Colorado and have two grown daughters.

Book Review

Understanding World Christianity: China

Reviewed by Peregrine de Vigo



Understanding World Christianity: China by Kim-kwong Chan. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019. Paperback, 176 pp., ISBN 13: 978-1506416601; ISBN 10: 1506416608. US$25.11 at Amazon; Kindle $14.57.

Fortress Press deserves praise for supporting the World Christianity Series. If you are not familiar with the series, checking it out will be worth your time. You can see the series in its development here.

The series is organized by nation and region, and each volume covers six intersecting topics to describe the history of Christianity and the faith as it is lived out today: historical, denominational, socio-political, geographical, biographical, and theological. In addition to the volume on China reviewed here, the series currently has volumes on Mexico, Eastern Africa, India, and an upcoming title on Russia. If the other volumes are of similar quality to the one reviewed here, we can hope that the series will be long-lived and can set a new standard for quality and international perspective on Christianity around the world.

Understanding World Christianity: China is written by Kim-kwong Chan, a renowned scholar in Chinese studies and theology. He has authored and co-authored 11 books, published more than 100 academic papers in English, Chinese, and French, and written for ChinaSource in the past.[1]

Through his travels around all parts of China as a nutritionist, Chan became deeply impressed with the stories he heard, leading him to become "an observer of China" (p. xiv). Following these early experiences, he undertook academic study of both Sinology (Chinese studies) and theology, in order to better grasp the object of his new-found affection. Three master's degrees and two PhDs later, Chan was well prepared for the decades of work he undertook, serving the church both inside the PRC and outside (hereafter, all mentions of China or Chinese refer to the PRC context).

While his academic credentials are impressive, we should not be deceived into thinking that Chan is an arm-chair academic. Many of the stories he relates in this book are based on first-person interviews with his subjects. Through family connections, and as a member of the Hong Kong Christian Council, he has had access to a wide diversity of Christian individuals, leaders, and groups, access rivaled by few scholars of Chinese Christianity. These personal contacts fueled his research. He retired from his ecclesiastical post as an ordained minister with the Anglican Church in 2016, but that has not curtailed his interest in Chinese Christian lives and Chinese Christianity, as this book attests.

Consistent with the framework for the World Christianity Series, *Understanding World Christianity: China* follows the six-chapter format described above. While I cannot speak for the other contexts, this multi-directional examination of Christianity in the PRC is remarkably well-aimed. Within this framework, Chan sets out two foci for the volume on China: "the experiences of Chinese Christians, and factors that have contributed to their present ecclesiastical reality."

Chronological

Although iterations of Christian faith have existed in China for 1,400 years, a great flourishing of Christian faith in China is only a little over 200 years old. Chan does not unearth any new historical data that radically alters our interpretations and understandings. Most refreshing is the balanced presentation of cross-cultural missions that acknowledges the work of foreign missionaries while highlighting a non-ideologically driven critique of the problems of 19th and 20th century mission endeavors.

Chan concludes the chapter by looking at the impact Chinese Christianity might have on the larger world population of Christians. He does an admirable job of correcting a common overemphasis on Protestant Christianity by highlighting recent Catholic and Orthodox Church developments. Chan kept his comments on prospects for Protestant traditions in China brief but insightful. Of note is the claim that "the unique ecclesial mode of the house church—simplistic, devoid of liturgy, laity centered—provides a new ecclesial paradigm challenging many present ecclesial practices" (p. 39).

Chan also highlights the potential that Chinese missionaries may have in the near future to contribute to the spread of the gospel beyond Chinese borders. "These Chinese missionaries often base their strategies on their past ecclesial experience of operating in unfavorable environments" (p. 39). This will be discussed further in the theological section.

Sociopolitical

Chan has written extensively on this subject, particularly the political experiences of the Chinese church. For those unfamiliar with the political structures under which the church in China operates, this is a concise introduction.[2] Chan points out that the current political leadership views religion as "no longer… a cultural phenomenon or a social group but as a social element with implications for national security" (p. 53). This is not new in Chinese history. Religious groups have a very long tradition of political intrigue in China, so naturally the current government will be suspicious of large, rapidly growing religious movements.

This chapter is packed with practical, useful information, and I hope international ministries will take note of several things. First, Chan rightly highlights the vast, gray nature of the politico-religious landscape. Be suspicious of any news media (conservative or liberal) that paints things in black-and-white. Second, observe the uniqueness of the Chinese sociopolitical landscape where you can have "government-organized nongovernment organizations" (p. 60). Yes, you read that correctly. Third, Chan comments that "it is sad to observe that often the institutional interest of some overseas Protestant groups seems to supersede the important goal of unity in the Chinese Protestant church" (p. 65). Chan also points out the struggle against division among Chinese ACCs (autonomous Christian communities). This, in part, relates to my question above regarding the, at times, undue influence of well-meaning but misguided Christians from abroad on Chinese cross-cultural mission efforts.

Denominational

Chan segments the history well to indicate the rapid transformations various local fellowships and networks have undergone at different points of time. Chan gently points out areas of theological weakness, such as the lack of basic understanding among registered (TSPM/CCC) church leaders regarding colored vestments. Chan also offers incisive critique of nonregistered churches (ACCs), offering a set of theological criteria for church,[3] and pointing out how many ACCs fall short of those criteria. Chan does not shy away from mentioning some of the problematic practices and complexity of relationships between local Chinese fellowships and foreign Christian influence. Chan is quite thorough in his presentation of the denominational aspect of Chinese Christianity, including a substantial discussion of interdenominational conflict and possible reconciliation. Chan is careful to include smaller groups that could be identified along some definition of "denominational" lines. These include formal and informal groups like politically and intellectually disenfranchised individuals (such as government officials and "cultural Christians"), and relatively isolated minority groups that are *de facto* denominational (such as Miao, Lahu, Wa, Lisu, and Jingpo).[4]

Geographical

Chan hits all the major points here, so there is not much to mention. He discusses the differences between the urban and rural worlds, (and oddly claims that there is "virtually no crossover" between them). He makes special mention of Wenzhou, and does not leave out the "peripheral" regions where there are many fewer Christians or Christian communities (with the exception of a few minority groups).

Biographical

This is the most emotionally moving chapter of the book. Chan bypasses the most well-known names in recent Chinese Christian history to focus on other influential giants of the faith that have received surprisingly little attention, including three Protestants and one Catholic. The only name likely to be familiar to some readers is Liu Xiaomin, famed writer of many contemporary Chinese hymns, called *Canaan Hymns*. Chan is an excellent storyteller, and each brief sketch gives good detail but also leaves you hungry for more stories and detail.

Theological

In the final chapter, Chan looks at the theological sphere through two lenses: first according to period, and assigning a motif to each period (cross, temple, and golden lampstand), and second by examining theological aspects from different angles. These include "church growth," a Chinese Catholic perspective, the sheer number of Christians in China, the Chinese church and missions, and projections for what we might anticipate in the future.

While all of these topics are exciting, this chapter may raise the most questions for readers.

For example, due to political constraints, the Chinese church has been restricted from evangelism practices common in "evangelical circles in the US and UK" (p. 177). Chan then queries whether the rapid growth of the Chinese church in the '80s and '90s was possibly due to "divine intervention" (p. 178). Yet, in the next paragraph, he avers that another significant factor "may also be sociocultural," due to a "nationwide religious resurgence" (p. 178). Chan also seems to endorse a form of church growth that can be "harness[ed] and transform[ed] into a program that reproduces the effect" (p. 178). This seems to be evidence of the influence of an Anglo-American evangelical emphasis on techniques that can, like scientific experiments, yield the same results over and over. Chan concludes that most recently this "pragmatic or ideological fulfillment the Chinese church used to offer [became] inadequate" (p. 181), and so the church perhaps once again "needs nothing less than divine intervention" (p. 181) in order to maintain high growth rates. So, does church growth depend on empirically developed techniques imported from the "West," or does it depend on divine intervention? A little more clarity here would be helpful.

Chan spends significant space discussing Chinese mission potential. He first references early Chinese mission efforts discussed previously in the book, then heavily emphasizes the Back to Jerusalem Movement (BJM/BTJ), popularized among Anglo-American evangelicals with books like Brother Yun's *Heavenly Man*. Chan claims that "the current impact in the [Muslim] field is noticeable" (p. 194) but does not support this claim with evidence that would inspire confidence. In fact, the claim is entirely unsupported, an anomaly in a largely well-documented book. Discussion then shifts to the vast supply of Chinese missionaries, though he notes that many of them have very little education or professional skills that would enable their appeal in Muslim regions, let alone training in cross-cultural issues or any significant understanding of Islamic cultures or languages.

Chan points out some sensitive missteps in recent Chinese mission work, including the martyrdom of two missionaries, supported by Korean missionaries, who were kidnapped and later killed by ISIS in 2016. Apparently, the team (thirteen Chinese, in all) were in Pakistan under largely false pretenses as "Chinese language teachers" but were conducting door-to-door evangelism. This does not sound like Chinese Christians who are familiar with suffering and a restrictive environment doing their best to avoid the unwanted attention that Chan spoke of. This should alert us to the possibility that these Chinese missionaries were following the playbook of Anglo-American "platform" missions, where "platform" refers to "the thing you do not really do, or do not do well, so that you can do the thing you want to do."

Finally, Chan closes with a view to the future noting the rampant division among Chinese Protestants. While he is right, there have also been some significant cooperative developments that should not be discounted. While Chan's claim that "Chinese Christians are developing their own ecclesial elements unique to their context" (p. 200) is true, it still seems somewhat overstated. Nevertheless, there is great potential for significant and lasting impact. Chinese Christians have a place in the Father's House.

Understanding World Christianity: China is not a magnum opus, in the sense of a paradigm-shifting argument for which a scholar comes to be known. Instead, it represents a lifetime of service, listening, and observation, bringing out the multi-perspectival essentials of Chinese Christianity, and presenting the complex web of discoveries in a concise and clear format. Chan deftly manages details with panoramic scope and provides thoughtful analysis of many key issues in Chinese Christianity today. His own quotation of a veteran Sinologist talking about watching China is an appropriate conclusion: "Expect the unexpected."

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[1] You can see Chan's ChinaSource posts here: https://www.chinasource.org/multi_author/kim-kwong-chan/.

[2] For those who are unaware, Chan reminds us that "foreigners in China who conduct illegal religious activities, such as spreading religious messages without permission, and whose acts violate the principle of the autonomy of Chinese religion come under the Ministry of National Security which deals with espionage and foreign infiltration" (p. 50).

[3] The criteria Chan provides are: "teaching authority, ministerial office, polity, and sacraments such as baptism and Eucharist. These criteria define church membership, ecclesiastical structure, and ecclesial self-understanding" (p. 91).

[4] ChinaSource has highlighted the question of denominations in China in quite a number of blog posts and articles. See: https://www.chinasource.org/?s=denomination.

Peregrine de Vigo (pseudonym), PhD, lived in central China for nine years and is a student of philosophy, sinology, and several other "-ologies."

ChinaSource Perspective

Viewing the Registered Church through Different Lenses

Brent Fulton

Image credit: Sam on Unsplash.

With the media's incessant focus on official persecution of the unregistered church in China, it is often easy to forget the vibrant dimensions of Christian life playing out in China's registered churches.

The TSPM, along with the churches operating under its auspices, is often relegated to almost footnote status in mainstream treatments of China's church, dismissed out of hand as "the government church." Where it is mentioned, it is usually in the context of particular restrictions placed upon TSPM pastors by Chinese authorities. This is certainly the case today, as Xi Jinping's "Sinification" campaign takes hold and pastors are under increased pressure to parrot the Party line, including during their Sunday sermons.

Such efforts to politicize the church are part of life within the registered church sphere, but they are by no means the whole story. This issue of the *Quarterly* takes a much-needed, in-depth look at the TSPM, its history, the pastors serving under its auspices, and the creative ways in which ministry is being carried out.

As Carsten Vala points out, a grasp of the TSPM's history is vital for understanding how Christians in China view the TSPM, and for assessing the validity of those views. Born out of the very real struggles in the early 20th century to define China's national identity, the TSPM represented one theological answer to the cultural and social questions of the day. It was not simply a convenient political device for placing China's Christians under the control of the Communist Party (although it did serve this purpose), but was seen by its leaders as the only way forward for the church in the new era. With the outbreak of the Korean conflict, the stated desire to see a Chinese church independent of missionary control took on a decidedly political dimension. It became the TSPM's function to hasten the departure of missionaries from China and to drive a wedge between Chinese Christians and the church abroad. In the ensuing years, TSPM leaders would participate in the persecution of thousands of Christians who refused to cooperate with the movement.

If we stop there, however, and view the TSPM only through the lens of history, we miss the vitality of the "official" church in today's China. Several of the contributors to this issue of the *Quarterly* tell of the innovation taking place in ministry, whether through Sunday school training or the creative use of digital platforms. While it is often assumed that the scope of such endeavors is limited to the relatively small minority of Chinese Christians who attend TSPM churches, in reality, what happens in these churches often does spill over to become a blessing to the whole church in China. Digital media and training courses are a couple areas where this is happening, along with Christian publishing. This year Nanjing Union Theological Seminary responded to the lockdowns taking place in China due to COVID-19 by publishing a new devotional journal, *Weekly Bread*, along with online messages and tutorials synchronized with the written guide. Thousands of Christians across China shared their devotional experiences and comments online within the first few weeks following the launch of the new publication.

Outside observers often focus on the division between registered and unregistered churches in China. It may be argued, however, that the TSPM is doing more to blur these lines than it is to accentuate them. In the minds of China's leaders, the TSPM's political mandate may not have changed, but thousands of TSPM churches on the ground are fulfilling a spiritual mandate that knows no political boundaries.

Brent Fulton is the founder of ChinaSource. He has served as the first president of ChinaSource, the managing director of the Institute for Chinese Studies at Wheaton College, and the founding US director of China Ministries International. Dr. Fulton holds MA and PhD degrees in political science from the University of Southern California and a BA in radio-TV-film from Messiah College. An avid China watcher, he has written and taught extensively on the church in China and on Chinese social and political phenomena. He is the author of two books and is currently working on a new book on Western narratives about the church in China.

Resource Corner

The Registered Church in China: Flourishing in a Challenging Environment

A Book Coming Soon by Wayne Ten Harmsel

Soon to be released by Wipf & Stock Publishers (Pickwick imprint), Wayne Ten Harmsel's new book, *The Registered Church in China: Flourishing in a Challenging Environment,* looks at a variety of issues and ties that the registered church deals with due to its relationship with the Chinese government.

Image credit: A friend of ChinaSource.

The Table of Contents

An Excerpt from Chapter 3

In the early 1950s an agency was established in China to register and keep account of all churches. The agency is called the *Lianghui*, which, roughly translated, means "two councils" or "two committees." The two councils are the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the Christian Council (CC). While the Christian Council is concerned more with internal church issues, the TSPM focuses more on external affairs. Because it relates directly with the government, the TSPM gets most of the attention and criticism. The churches belonging to the *Lianghui* are commonly referred to as Three-Self churches, a negative identifying marker implying that the Three-Self churches are completely controlled by the government.

Registered church leaders have to live with the name, but they refuse to acknowledge that the TSPM controls them. For them, the TSPM refers not to a dominating structure, but rather to a bridge-like structure between the church and the government. The truth is, however, the TSPM is more complicated than a simple bridge-like organization. When I asked specifically what the TSPM does, most pastors and lay people used words like "be responsible for," "manage," or most often "*guanli"* meaning *"*to oversee." One pastor said the churches "are under the supervision of the TSPM." At the same time, these same pastors insist that the churches do what they want and are not controlled by the government. Maybe it is simply a matter of semantics or maybe a case of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

Pastors registered in this system on the whole are a practical, realistic bunch. They are aware of their situation and realize that at any time it could deteriorate. In the meantime, they simply need to do what they can. One pastor reflected on this reality:

> Since the revolution, the Communist party has been in charge. The party ideology and the government ideology are communist. That's the reality! But we give thanks to God that in this kind of society he is calling and gathering his people. There will necessarily be conflict. In this situation, the most important thing is prayer. God loves his people and will hear their prayers. In this society, temptation is very strong. There are temptations like power, money, and position, and many people dance to their tunes. This leads to many Christians' downfall. But if you don't give in and know you are a child of God, he will certainly lead you and see you through. With the government, you need to be able to distinguish what is important and what is not important. Faith must be held on to strongly. Administrative things we can compromise about and negotiate. We have had good relations with the government.

Framing the issue, another pastor said,

> "The church is not free to protest in Tiananmen Square, but it is free to preach the gospel in church. Likewise, the government cannot preach atheism in church. We cannot go to the Great Hall of the People and say that atheism will certainly be

> destroyed. But we can preach in church that those who believe in Jesus will go to heaven and those who do not believe in Jesus will certainly go to hell."

Echoing this sentiment, another pastor said that, "There's freedom to do anything on church property, but there are things you cannot do in public places." These comments reflect the government's unique interpretation of religious freedom: people are free to believe any way they want, but they can only express that belief on church property. This of course impacts most heavily on evangelism and social justice, things which are not allowed outside of church grounds.

Registered church leaders tell me that they can compromise on non-essentials while holding firmly to the fundamentals of the faith. They believe that silence regarding political and social justice issues buys them the ability to continue preaching and teaching the basic Christian gospel. The things they are giving up allow them to hang on to what they most cherish. Up until 2015, this approach seemed efficacious, but now, the churches are watching and wondering.

I am paraphrasing another pastor who said that the church should be separate from the government. Scripture says we can honor the government and those in power, but we have no obligation to be involved in politics. If you are concerned about flags in church, your thinking is a bit narrow. If you go to a church in the US and see a national flag, you will not automatically conclude that there is no faith in that church, so why come to that conclusion about Chinese churches? Whether to have a flag or not is not an issue of fundamental belief. Actually, it is strange for Christians in China not to support the government. When Jesus came, he did not recruit people to rebel against the Roman government. In the face of the injustices of the Roman government, Jesus said that we are to love our enemy. Opposing the government is a matter of personal opinion, not a matter of faith.

Registered church pastors know how to survive, and they have a strong sense of priorities. One pastor said:

> The amount of religious freedom in the US is dangerous, while the situation in China is not bad. Christians do not need to be concerned about the government, but they need to worry about living in a way that honors God and helps spread the gospel. Some pastors are more concerned with the government than they should be. As a church, we are here to worship God, not to change the government. The government will always be here and we should just ignore it. Our focus should be on Christ's return rather than political ideology.

He added that, "Christians need to keep their priorities straight, focused on Christ and his return,"—an interesting statement from a pastor who supposedly cannot talk about the second coming.

Watch for this publication, which should be available later this year.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement **Continued from page 4**

house churches. Not only is the Xi government attempting to forcibly implement religious policy by eradicating house churches, it is also constricting the number of public worship spaces in Three-Self churches, and even announcing efforts to transform the meaning and practices of traditional Protestant worship through the "Sinicization" campaign.

The future looks rather uncertain for the popular support of the TSPM and its official churches, as well as for house churches, as local authorities face increasing pressure to constrain official church activities and actively ban previously permitted house church groups.

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[1] Henry Venn, *Memoir of the Rev. H. Venn : the Missionary Secretariat of Henry Venn; prebendary of St. Paul's, and honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society*, London: Scottiswoode & Company, 1880, https://archive.org/stream/memoirofrevhvenn00knig/memoirofrevhvenn00knig_djvu.txt, accessed on July 15, 2020, p.316.

[2] Vala, Carsten T., *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God above Party?* (Routledge, 2017), p. 90. Or see here: https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C21&q=carsten+vala+politics+of+protestant+churches+and+party-state&btnG=.

[3] Anthony Barthels, "Sinicization: Political, Social, and Doctrinal Implications," 2020, Asia Lutheran Seminary, Master's Thesis.

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