Chinese Protestant Christianity Today

Daniel H. Bays

ABSTRACT Protestant Christianity has been a prominent part of the general religious resurgence in China in the past two decades. In many ways it is the most striking example of that resurgence. Along with Roman Catholics, as of the 1950s Chinese Protestants carried the heavy historical liability of association with Western domination or imperialism in China, yet they have not only overcome that inheritance but have achieved remarkable growth. Popular media and human rights organizations in the West, as well as various Christian groups, publish a wide variety of information and commentary on Chinese Protestants. This article first traces the gradual extension of interest in Chinese Protestants from Christian circles to the scholarly world during the last two decades, and then discusses salient characteristics of the Protestant movement today. These include its size and rate of growth, the role of Church–state relations, the continuing foreign legacy in some parts of the Church, the strong flavour of popular religion which suffuses Protestantism today, the discourse of Chinese intellectuals on Christianity, and Protestantism in the context of the rapid economic changes occurring in China, concluding with a perspective from world Christianity.

Protestant Christianity has been a prominent part of the general religious resurgence in China in the past two decades. Today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe.[1] One recent thoughtful scholarly assessment characterizes Protestantism as "flourishing" though also "fractured" (organizationally) and "fragile" (due to limits on the social and cultural role of the Church).[2] And popular media and human rights organizations in the West, as well as various Christian groups, publish a wide variety of information and commentary on Chinese Protestants. Here I intend first to trace the gradual extension of interest in Chinese Protestants from Christian circles to the scholarly world during the last two decades, and then to discuss salient characteristics of the Protestant movement today.

The phenomenon of rapid Protestant growth was first noted soon after 1980 by several church-related organizations and their publications in Hong Kong and the West. Some of these were reports issued by evangelical organizations which tended to speak for the "house church" (those not registered with the government) sector of Protestants.[3] Others were

1. Mark Noll, "The globalisation of Christianity: a report" (unpublished, 2001), p. 2. This is a summary of papers and discussions at a conference of the Currents in World Christianity Project (Westminster College, Cambridge, UK), held at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, 3–7 July 2001.

2. Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China today: fragile, fragmented, flourishing," in Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (eds.), *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 195–216.

3. The Chinese Church Research Centre, formerly based in Hong Kong and now in Taiwan, and its affiliated organization China Ministries International, for over 20 years has

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reports and analysis by China-related offices of ecumenical church bodies in the United States, Britain and Canada, which were more attuned to the officially sanctioned Protestant Churches linked to the Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the organization designed as a link between the Protestant community and the state which had first been set up in the early 1950s, was abolished in the 1960s, and re-established, together with the China Christian Council (CCC), at the end of the 1970s.[4] The reasons for the intense interest in the Chinese Protestant Church by many on the entire spectrum of Christian circles in the United States, Britain and Canada is itself a very interesting historical question, for the most part outside the scope of this article.[5] At any rate, a variety of Christian organizations based in the West continue to contribute to the discussion of Chinese Protestantism.

In the 1980s Western scholars based in universities and secular research bodies also began to take note of the revival of religions of all kinds in China, and by the end of the decade many were including Protestantism in the discussion.[6] In the early 1990s some excellent academic studies of Protestantism began to appear. One of the best of these, by Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, set a benchmark as both an objective descriptive profile and an analysis of the dynamics of the social and political as well as religious dimensions of Protestantism.[7] Among research bodies dedicated to analysis of human rights issues in China, whereas religion and issues of religious persecution were not often

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footnote continued

published a variety of reports and periodicals on Christianity in China, for example *China and the Church Today* and *Zhongguo yu fuyin* (*China and the Gospel*). Overseas Ministries Fellowship (now OMF International), organizational descendent of the China Inland Mission, also published reports throughout the 1980s on the revival of Protestantism, and continues to do so (e.g. in *China Insight*, written by Tony Lambert). Many other Christian groups publish newsletters in Chinese or English.

4. *China Notes* was published throughout the 1980s and until the early 1990s by the East Asia/Pacific Office of National Council of Churches (USA). In the UK, The China Study Project, now the China Department, Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, from 1980 published *Religion in the People's Republic of China: Documentation*, which since 1986 has continued as *China Study Journal*. The latter has extensive translations of Chinese government policy documents as well as reports on the local religious scene for all religions in China. In Hong Kong, beginning in 1983 the ecumenical Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture published bimonthly English and Chinese versions of *Bridge* (*Qiao*), with first-hand reports on visits to churches in China. *Bridge* ceased publication in the late 1990s. Drawing on many of these materials from Christian sources in China, Philip L. Wickeri wrote a generally favourable study of the TSPM and its place in Chinese society as a PhD dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary, later published as *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

5. A thoughtful discussion of some aspects of this for the US, but which would partially apply to the UK and Canada as well, is Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: a Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), esp. ch. 6.

6. For example, inclusion of Protestants in Julian F. Pas (ed.), *The Turning of the Tide: Religion in China Today* (Hong Kong: Royal Asiatic Society and Oxford University Press, 1989).

7. *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). A study from an evangelical Christian perspective is Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (Wheaton, IL: OMF/Shaw Publishers, 1994). Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, is more sympathetic than either of these to the viewpoint of the TSPM.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

covered in the 1980s, in the 1990s Amnesty International and especially Human Rights Watch/Asia have included extensive documentation on religion, including Protestants.[8]

In the meantime, in China during the 1980s both the TSPM/CCC[9] Church leadership in Shanghai and Nanjing, and secular scholars at universities and research institutes at various places in the country, began to study and publish materials concerning Protestantism. The Jinling Theological Seminary in Nanjing, the only graduate-level seminary among the more than 20 Protestant seminaries and Bible schools, began publishing the *Jinling shenxuezhi* (*Jinling Theological Review)*, as well as *Zongjiao* (*Religion*).[10] Historians, social scientists and philosophers at major universities and in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences began including Chinese Protestantism in their expanding research on religion. A landmark volume in 1987 published the results of field research on religion which included several studies of Protestant believers.[11] In the 1990s, two bibliographical indexes of academic works on Christianity published since 1949 showed the rapid development of Chinese scholarly work on Protestantism, mainly by historians and philosophers, after 1980.[12] This academic interest has continued down to the present, now including, as described below, a certain number of Chinese intellectuals who have themselves in some fashion adopted Christian ideas or advocate Christian values as useful for Chinese society.

Thus there is no lack of material to consult in assessing Protestantism today. The problem is the widely varying points of view of the sources and their sometimes conflicting claims.

8. For example, Human Rights Watch/Asia, *Continuing Religious Repression in China* (June 1993), *China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect* (June 1994), and *China: State Control of Religion* (October 1997).

9. The TSPM is not a Church organization. It is a body set up specifically to act as an interface and conduit between the registered and therefore government-recognized local churches and the offices of the Religious Affairs Bureau (government) and the United Front Work Department (Communist Party). The China Christian Council, a parallel body which has considerable overlapping membership with the TSPM, is less political and more "pastoral" in function: it co-ordinates and assists the churches with training of lay leaders, published materials, etc.

10. The latter journal is jointly published by the seminary and Nanjing University. After 1985, an annual publication of translations of articles on theology and church issues from these journals and from other Chinese sources, *Chinese Theological Review*, has been published in the US. 14 issues have appeared. In addition, since 1991 the Amity News Service, based in Hong Kong and representing the TSPM/China Christian Council, has published a bimonthly English-language digest of articles from *Tianfeng* and other sources in China.

11. Luo Zhufeng (ed.), *Zhongguo shehuizhuyi shiqi de zongjiao wenti* (*Religious Questions During the Socialist Period in China*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan, 1987), published in English as *Religion under Socialism in China*, trans. Donald E. MacInnis and Zheng Xi'an (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991).

12. An index of works published in China from 1949 to 1993 is in Zhu Weizheng (ed.), *Jidujiao yu jindai wenhua* (*Christianity and Modern Culture*) (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1994), pp. 429–489. An index of historical works only, published from 1949 to 1997, is in Zhuo Xinping and Xu Zhiwei (ed.), *Jiduzongjiao yanjiu* (*Study of Christianity*) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1999), 1st collection, pp. 245–401.

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How Many Chinese Protestants?

There is uncertainty even on the part of the best-informed analysts as to how many Protestants there are in China. Major reasons for this, and for the resulting widely varying claims of numbers, are: much Church growth in the last two decades has been in the countryside, where it is difficult to count any group with accuracy; and a certain number, perhaps more than half, of Protestant believers are in autonomous Christian communities ("house churches," as opposed to congregations registered with the TSPM). Some of these communities are quite large, numbering in the hundreds or thousands.

The "numbers game" is important because the social and political importance of a group of 15 million nation-wide is very different from that of a group numbering 75 million or more (these are the approximate parameters for the debate). By the late 1980s it was clear that there was a large gap between estimates of the size of the Protestant community made by the TSPM, which for the most part counted only those believers in registered churches and recognized smaller "meeting points," and those made by many groups outside China which attempted to include all believers. The careful 1993 study by Hunter and Chan concluded that the "official" figure of about five million Protestants was far too low, and that the actual figure was very likely to be 20 million or more.[13] In the most recent past, "official" TSPM estimates for 2000 claimed more than 13,000 churches, 35,000 meeting points and 15 million believers.[14] Almost certainly the real number of Protestants, including those not in groups recognized by the TSPM, is higher. But how much higher? It is nearly impossible to answer definitively. In recent years various Chinese government agencies have estimated the number of Protestants to be between 25 and 35 million.[15] An analyst in the evangelical Christian sector, Tony Lambert, estimates that the number "may be" 50 million, but he is reluctant to claim a specific figure.[16]

Two points should be made about the size and official/unofficial components of the Protestant community. First, there are clearly more Protestants than Catholics in China today. Estimates of the Catholic community centre on a figure of about ten million. This is a dramatic reversal of the proportions of a half-century ago, at the end of the missionary era, when there were about three million Catholics and somewhere between 700,000 and one million Protestants. Secondly, the Protestant bifurcation between TSPM-related churches and autonomous communities is not well-defined. In some areas there is contact, co-operation and individuals active in both. And the theological beliefs of TSPM and non-TSPM groups overlap a great deal. Why then the

13. Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, esp. pp. 66–71.

14. *Chinese Theological Review*, No. 14 (2000), p. 155; *China Insight* (November/December 2000).

15. *China Insight* (November/December 2000). Tetsunao Yamamori and Kim-kwong Chan, *Witnesses to Power* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), p. xiv.

16. Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (London: Monarch Books, 1999).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

continuing importance of the distinction between registered and autonomous, TSPM and house churches? The answer lies partly in the role of the state.

Church and State Issues among Protestants

Like all religious believers in China, Protestants have to live with state control of and interference in their activities. For TSPM pastors and congregations, that means monitoring by the state, required political study for pastors, certain restrictions on acceptable topics for preaching and intervention in church personnel matters. Autonomous groups are vulnerable to much more coercive and punitive state action, including physical harassment, detention, fines, and labour re-education or criminal proceedings and prison sentences.[17]

There is nothing new about this pattern. Since imperial times, certainly since the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), state registration and monitoring of religious activities, though irregularly exercised, was a constant reality of organized religious life.[18] One reason this has been so is that the state itself has had religious dimensions. The contemporary state structure and Communist Party domination of public life have inherited this tradition and have built upon it a pattern of ritual, vocabulary and public discourse which is similar to that of theocratic organizations.[19] So legitimacy of the state structure necessitates vigilance against dissenting or critical voices arising from authentically religious sources. And for more than a decade, since the fall of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, the Party has been aware of the contribution which Christian Churches, Catholic and Protestant, made to the demise of several of those regimes. The bureaucratic control apparatus also evinces a purely administrative imperative in its behaviour. According to a senior official interviewed in 1991, referring to religious believers, intellectuals, and journalists:

> In fact all policies concerning these people are the same. They are part of the overall ideological control mechanism. The basic principle is simple: if they are obedient, then we treat them well. If they are not, then we discipline them … Christians say they must obey God, journalists say they are serving the public, intellectuals say they are developing culture. But from our point of view these excuses are all irrelevant. We treat these people as an administrative problem.[20]

Whether from religious principle, aversion to administrative interference or any number of other reasons, including personal animosities towards TSPM leaders or the fact that in some rural areas no TSPM

17. Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 209 has a concise description.

18. For a perceptive historical overview see Kim-kwong Chan, "A Chinese perspective on the interpretation of the Chinese government's religious policy," in Alan Hunter and Don Rimmington (eds.), *All Under Heaven: Chinese Tradition and Christian Life in the People's Republic of China* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1992). For an example of the state's bureaucracy at work in the Qing, see Vincent Goossaert, "Counting the monks: the 1736–1739 census of the Chinese clergy," *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2000), pp. 40–85.

19. See Alan Hunter and Don Rimmington, "Religion and social change in contemporary China," in Hunter and Rimmington, *All Under Heaven*, pp. 11–37, esp. pp. 14–16.

20. Quoted in Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, p. 28.

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church exists nearby, many Protestants choose to function as autonomous entities. So it seems likely that sporadic tension between a substantial number of Protestants and the state will continue. But it is possible that the presence of both categories of Protestants actually helps both. In a recent survey of trends in relations between Protestants and the state in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Paul Freston speculates that in China, the house church option, and the likelihood that stricter state control might actually drive more believers out of the open churches into house churches, "means the TSPM has a greater margin of manoeuvre vis-à-vis the government than it would otherwise. And the TSPM's existence gains concessions for believers that house churches alone would not obtain."[21] This last observation points to the undoubted fact that were it not for the role played by the TSPM and its longtime leader K.H. Ting (Ding Guangxun), Chinese Protestants almost certainly would not enjoy even the limited protections and practical freedoms they now have.[22]

The Legacy of the Missionary Past

Foreign missionaries left China a full half-century ago, but in many urban churches the Western imprint is still visible in church architecture, liturgy, music and theology. Many Western visitors to TSPM churches today, seeing the robed choir, hearing familiar Western hymns sung in Chinese and an evangelical sermon they might have heard in the United States or Britain, may wonder how indigenous the Chinese Church really is.[23] This situation is not altogether surprising, because of the strength of the foreign model and the fact that the last generation of Church leaders to be trained before 1949, now well into their 70s and older, is still influential, though it is fast passing from the scene. Yet it is ironic that the TSPM, created explicitly to sever ties with the Western churches in the 1950s and create an indigenous post-denominational "self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing" Church, has perpetuated much of the appearance and tone of the old missionary churches, at least in many urban congregations.

The urban house churches are also not free from the strong historical influence of the West. Many still use translations of old Western devotional classics such as *Streams in the Desert*, and in the words of one recent observer, much of their theology is "drenched in Dispensational-

21. Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 105.

22. Bishop K.H. Ting, longtime Principal of Jinling Theological Seminary in Nanjing and chairman of both the TSPM and the CCC, is now officially retired, but is still influential. In both Chinese and foreign circles he has been praised by some for his astute leadership and success in reviving the public presence of Protestants, and reviled by others for alleged compromise and betrayal of the true Church. Recent publication of a large collection of his writings gives insight into this complex figure. Janice Wickeri (ed.), *Love Never Ends: Papers by K.H. Ting* (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2000). This is an English translation by Wickeri of the Chinese volume published in 1998.

23. Alex Buchan, "Is the Chinese Church Chinese enough?" *ChinaSource*, Vol. 3, No.1 (2001), pp. 1–10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ism and garnished with Creationism and Inerrancy – all theological exports from Europe and North America."[24]

In the top levels of the visible urban Protestant structures, including the TSPM/CCC and the seminaries, there seems to be increasing concern about what is perceived by some Chinese Church leaders as the persistence of obsolete or even "backward" theological currents of an evangelical or fundamentalist nature. This means doctrines stressing individual salvation and exclusiveness of the Christian community which were characteristic of the theology brought by Western missionaries in the first decades of the 20th century.[25] These are seen by some TSPM/CCC leaders as hindering relations between Protestants and the wider society of secular Chinese. It is undoubtedly true that adherence to this traditional theology makes it difficult to have dialogue between Protestants and Chinese intellectuals and scholars who, despite their interest in Christianity, find the level of intellectual discourse in the Church far too low, and have little interest in attending or interacting with the Church. It is precisely those traditional evangelical characteristics, however, which define the faith of the great majority of believers who attend the TSPM churches, as well as the house churches. It can also be argued that these characteristics helped enable Protestant communities to survive the decades of persecution before 1980. Thus it is an inherently complex and difficult task to try to change the theological orientation of the majority of Chinese Protestants, to which they seem strongly attached.

The Legacy of the Independent Churches

Traditional evangelical beliefs and doctrines are even more characteristic of autonomous Protestant communities than they are of TSPM congregations. Part of the house church sector of Protestants descends from Chinese independent churches founded early in the 20th century as a reaction against the missionary-run churches. These, some of which were individual churches and others of which were movements nationwide in scope (such as Watchman Nee's "Little Flock" or the True Jesus Church), were critical of the hierarchy and institutional complexity of Western denominations.[26] Most sought a return to primitivist Christianity, and put stress on direct spiritual experience of conversion or supernatural acts such as healing or prophecy, as well as practising considerable autonomy for local congregations.[27] Today, many in the autonomous Christian communities preserve the theological traditions and practices of

24. *Ibid.* p. 1.

25. *Chinese Theological Review*, No. 14 (2000) includes translations of presentations by top Chinese Church leaders from the nation-wide Protestant conference of late 1998 which were published in 1999 in the *Jinling shenxuezhi* from the Nanjing seminary, several of which stress this theme.

26. I use quotation marks for "Little Flock" (xiaoqun) because this is a name used only by outsiders.

27. Daniel H. Bays, "The growth of independent Christianity in China, 1900–1937," in Daniel H. Bays (ed.), *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 307–316.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these independent churches, especially Pentecostals, whose overt manifestations of being moved by the Holy Spirit (such as speaking in tongues, praying loudly en masse, healing practices) are frowned on in most TSPM churches because in their view they appear too much like superstition rather than religion.[28]

At the same time, some Protestants in the tradition of the pre-1949 independent churches, for example the "Little Flock" and the True Jesus Church among others, worship in TSPM congregations. Because the True Jesus Church is Sabbath-observant – that is, they worship on Saturday – TSPM churches where they are present usually have a Saturday service. A Saturday service is also important for former Seventh Day Adventists, descendants of members of the old American missionary denomination. An important part of "Little Flock" practice is the breaking of bread (a form of communion or the Lord's supper), usually on Sunday night. Thus those TSPM churches with believers from this tradition sometimes have a Sunday evening service which is mainly populated by these members. At such a service, many of the women may cover their heads (another "Little Flock" practice), and the congregation will break bread in the manner of the tradition.[29]

Clearly, the Protestant scene today is thoroughly coloured by traditions from both the old missionary-established denominational churches and the several strands of the independent church movement dating back to the early 20th century. Yet beyond either of these components, perhaps the most striking feature of contemporary Protestantism is the large number of new converts who come from none of these traditions, but are products of Chinese popular culture.

The Rural Church, Chinese Popular Culture and Sectarianism

The great majority of Chinese Protestants live in rural areas, and many have only minimal knowledge of the Christian doctrines and ritual behaviour that would be familiar to most urban Christians. In their 1993 study, Hunter and Chan claimed that in understanding the appeal of Christianity to many Chinese, especially in the countryside, we must realize that in practical terms "many Christian activities … are closely related to traditional cultural patterns."[30] They went on to specify many of those linkages to traditional popular culture, such as in the function of prayer, requests for healing, charismatic phenomena like shamanism, moral norms, ideas about sin and salvation, and the pragmatic aspects of conversion.[31] In many ways, the tone of Chinese Protestantism on the

28. A brief description of some basic Pentecostal practices is in Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, pp. 145–155.

29. Many of the articles reporting local church practices in *Bridge* from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s note this mixture of traditions in many TSPM churches. I have myself observed it at churches in Shanghai, Fuzhou, Hangzhou and Jinan.

30. *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, p. 188.

31. *Ibid.* ch. 4.

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local level of practice is very different from that of the West, despite having similar doctrinal tenets.

The growth spurt from the mid-1990s to the present has brought millions more into the churches or autonomous communities, and has stretched even further the scarce personnel resources of the TSPM churches and the body of trained clerical personnel available to provide pastoral leadership. The more than 20 seminaries and Bible schools cannot keep up with the demand. In 1999 there were only about 3,000 seminary graduates nation-wide, of whom 1,300 were ordained.[32] And even though annually there are over 2,000 provincial, county and municipal level short-term programmes of a few weeks or months sponsored by CCC bodies to train lay leaders for the burgeoning churches, these likewise result in only spotty provision of knowledgeable local leaders.

The result, insofar as can be inferred from scattered sources in the absence of formal field studies in the rural areas, has been the flourishing of an entire spectrum of sectarian groups, ranging from identifiably Protestant to quasi-Christian. Two of the apparently better organized of the more or less orthodox Protestant groups are the Chongsheng pai (Born again sect) and the Quanfanwei jiaohui (Full scope church), which stresses a dramatic conversion experience including copious weeping.[33] The religious culture of these groups, in the words of a recent study, typically stresses "direct personal experience of God, centered on literal reading of the Bible, spread by itinerant preachers with little in the way of formal education (theological or otherwise), but a great deal of dedication and enthusiasm. Suspicion of the state, and of the TSPM/CCC for its ties to the state, are characteristic, as is an otherworldly and often eschatological orientation."[34]

A recent study by Leung Ka-lun of Hong Kong documents thoroughly the phenomenon of Protestant sectarian groups in the countryside taking up practices of traditional popular culture. Their millenarianism (stressing the imminent second coming of Jesus, but reminiscent as well of the anticipated advent of Buddhist saviour figures), utilitarian agendas in conversion, and emphasis on magic and the supernatural, all facilitated by minimally trained leaders, make some of them a reflection of traditional cultural patterns as much as of Christianity.[35]

These tendencies in the countryside have resulted in some extreme groups evolving into sects which most Christians would unhesitatingly label heretical. Groups such as the Beili wang (Established king), Mentuhui (Disciples sect), and many others often have a charismatic leader who proclaims himself to be Christ or otherwise divine, and who creates

32. *Chinese Theological Review*, No. 14 (2000), p. 155.

33. Summary description, with several sources noted, in Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 201.

34. *Ibid*. p. 201.

35. Leung Ka-lun (Liang Jialin), *Gaige kaifang yilai de Zhongguo nongcun jiaohui* (*China's Rural Churches Since the Perform Period*) (Hong Kong: Jiandao shenxueyuan, 1999). Excerpts translated in *China Study Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1999), pp. 22–34. Also see Claudia Wahrisch-Oblau, "Healing prayers and healing testimonies in mainland Chinese churches," *ibid*. pp. 5–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

new sacred instructions or scriptures. They typically denounce orthodox Christian congregations, perform alleged spectacular miracles, promise deliverance from an imminent apocalypse, and demand obedience and resources from their followers. In some respects they are similar to various popular religious sects in late imperial China, or even the Taipings of the 19th century. For the past two decades such groups have troubled the Protestant movement in China and have siphoned off many rural Christians from the mainstream of the faith. The sects have also recruited in urban areas. In the late 1990s both the national TSPM/CCC offices and leading house church groups published booklets denouncing many of these sects.[36] National Church leaders routinely point out the dangers of heretical sects in their discussions of Protestant affairs.[37]

These recent tendencies towards rural sectarianism may indicate that whereas most observers of Protestantism in China have in the past drawn the major fault line between registered, state-recognized TSPM churches and unregistered house churches whether urban or rural, perhaps that line should be drawn between urban and rural Protestant expressions whether registered or not. This is similar to the suggestion by Richard Madsen that for Chinese Catholicism we should look below the elite level of national organizations and relations with the Vatican and view rural, lay-led Catholic communities as a variant of Chinese folk religion.[38] A major question for the present and future is the urban impact of those sectarian Christians who are part of the massive migration from the rural areas to the cities in search of work. Will they be reconverted to orthodox Protestantism (or Catholicism), or will they perpetuate their sometimes heterodox sectarianism in the urban setting?

Protestantism Among Ethnic Minorities

The Chinese mainland officially has 55 national minorities. They number over 100 million, and inhabit areas constituting about 60 per cent of China's territory, mainly in strategic border areas. Some of these ethnic groups responded very favourably to Christianity before the communist period, such as the Hua Miao.[39] In Protestant conversion it seems that some minorities found social and psychological resources to resist domination and oppression by both the Han majority and by other

36. Four articles in *China Study Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1998), pp. 6–32. Tony Lambert, "Modern sects and cults in China," pp. 6–9; Lu Yunfeng, "Report on an investigation into the illegal organisation, the 'Disciples sect'," pp. 9–16; Luo Weihong, "The facts about the activities of the heterodox sect 'The established king'," pp. 17–21; and Zhong Guofa, "A survey of newly emerged religious sects in the republican era," pp. 22–32.

37. One example is Ma Jianhua, "The development of rural Christianity in China and its challenges," *Chinese Theological Review*, No. 13 (1999), pp. 65–71.

38. See Richard P. Madsen, "Beyond orthodoxy: Catholicism as Chinese folk religion," in Uhalley and Wu, *China and Christianity*, pp. 233–249, and also Madsen's article in the present volume.

39. For an overview of the pre-1949 pattern, Ralph R. Covell, *The Liberating Gospel in China: The Christian Faith among China's Minority Peoples* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995). Also Norma Diamond, "Christianity and the Hua Miao: writing and power," in Bays, *Christianity in China*, pp. 138–157.

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minorities, and others found reinforcement for traditional cultural or religious identities. Some minorities that had substantial numbers of Protestants were strikingly loyal to their faith despite persecution after 1949.[40]

There has always been a widely varying pattern in the willingness of some minority groups and the unwillingness of others to convert to Christianity.[41] In the recent and present situation in China, the minorities who inhabit inaccessible interior areas in the south-west are being bypassed by the national movement towards modernization, and moreover are often victims of extreme poverty, drug addiction and social breakdown. Some of these groups have been very receptive to Protestantism. Moreover, some county governments in these areas, in an ironic reversal of the past stance of government vis-à-vis religion, but desperate to combat the drug problem and its dangers to public health and law and order, have actively promoted the conversion to Christianity of the afflicted peoples, and have facilitated their evangelization by Chinese Protestants.[42]

Chinese Intellectuals and Protestantism: the Phenomenon of "Cultural Christians" and the Missing Public Role of the Church

The first part of the article referred to the fact that since the 1980s there has been an increasing number of Chinese intellectuals who do research on Protestant Christianity, especially historians and philosophers. Some believe that Protestantism was centrally involved in the overall process of modernization that fuelled the economic development, political democratization and world-wide expansion of the West in the past few centuries. Others have found Protestant ethics and patterns of community formation interesting or attractive. Some intellectuals have actively advocated China's adoption of some aspects of Christianity as part of its own modernization efforts, and a certain number of these intellectuals have themselves become Christians.[43]

One of the first, most prolific and well-known of "cultural Christians" was Liu Xiaofeng, who began writing in the 1980s and now lives in Hong Kong. Several other intellectuals, both overseas and at universities and research units within China, are serious and knowledgeable scholars of Christianity, especially of Protestantism, and in recent years these scholars have published an impressive array of books and articles analysing

40. Diamond, "Christianity and the Hua Miao," and T'ien Ju-k'ang, *Peaks of Faith* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

41. See the concluding chapter of Covell, *The Liberating Gospel*.

42. Case studies in Yamamori and Chan, *Witnesses to Power*, pp. 18–35.

43. For recent views, see the following. Zhuo Xinping, "Discussion on 'cultural Christians' in China," in Uhalley and Wu, *China and Christianity*, pp. 283–300. Chen Cunfu, "Historical and cultural background to the emergence of scholars in mainland China studying Christianity (SMSCs)," in Samuel Ling and Stacey Bieler (eds.), *Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel* (San Gabriel, CA: China Horizon, 1999), pp. 83–108. Edwin Hui, "The 'cultural Christian' phenomenon in immediate context, with theological reflections," in *ibid.* pp. 109–136.

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Christianity.[44] Some of these scholars may be Christian believers as well, but it is very difficult to know with certainty.[45] Whereas sometimes Chinese Christian intellectuals outside China are willing to participate in conferences and publications revealing their identity as Christian believers, intellectuals in China who study Christianity, including those who may be believers, have very little or no connection with the organized Church, whether TSPM or autonomous Christian communities, and normally do not reveal their personal beliefs.[46] Public knowledge that one is a religious believer can be of no help, and would almost certainly be a detriment, to one's career. Moreover, the paths of secular and religious studies of Christianity only infrequently cross. Academic conferences and publications on Christianity seldom include participation by Protestant representatives such as Church leaders or seminary professors, and with few exceptions meetings of Protestant leaders and seminary academics do not include secular academics.[47] One basic explanation for this, in addition to the personal career consideration just mentioned, is the perceived low level of academic discourse in the Protestant seminaries and publications, and the traditional, somewhat anti-intellectual, theology of the Church. Hence the desire of some TSPM leaders to "modernize" Protestant theology and establish more discourse with secular intellectuals.

The separation of Protestant intellectuals in the churches from those intellectuals interested in Christianity but who function in the secular realm of research institute or university is representative of the gulf between Protestantism and public issues in China today. Although some individuals who have run foul of the state for labour organizing or for attempting to organize political movements independent of the Communist Party apparently have partly been motivated by their beliefs as Protestant Christians, formal Church authorities, whether in the TSPM or the autonomous communities, refrain from comment on public issues. The Protestant magazine *Tianfeng* often has articles or answers to letters from readers which attempt to help believers cope with the stresses of economic and social change, family problems, or intra-church conflict.

44. A few of many possible items include: Gao Shining and He Guanghu (eds.), *Jidujiao wenhua yu xiandaihua* (*Christianity and Modernization*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996); Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu (eds.), *Jidujiao wenhua pinglun* (*Christian Culture Review*), No. 6 (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1997); He Guanghu and Xu Zhiwei (eds.), *Duihua: Rushidao yu jidujiao* (*Dialogues Between Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity*) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1998); He Guanghu, *He Guanghu zixuanji* (*Selected Works of He Guanghu*) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1999).

45. A leading scholar of Christian studies in China has warned observers to distinguish carefully between those Chinese intellectuals interested in the study of Christianity ("scholars in mainland China studying Christianity") and the much smaller number among them who have actually become believing Christians themselves. Zhuo Xinping, "Discussion on 'cultural Christians' in China."

46. An example of Chinese intellectuals overseas speaking frankly of their faith is Yuan Zhiming *et al.*, *Soul Searching: Chinese Intellectuals on Faith and Society* (Wheaton, IL: China Horizon, 1997), with ten essays by seven different scholars.

47. For a partial exception see Philip Wickeri and Lois Cole (eds.), *Christianity and Modernization: A Chinese Debate* (Hong Kong: DAGA Press, 1995).

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There is a small but potentially important Protestant presence which has been established in the area of social services, provided mainly through the Amity Foundation, to groups neglected by the government and the larger society, such as the physically disabled.[48] And in recent years churches have willingly participated in relief efforts and contributed to relief funds at times of floods or other calamities. Beyond this, however, Protestantism has practically no public presence: no radio or television, no Christian bookshops (except the book table or book room in TSPM churches), no social or political commentary, or personal connections to those in high office.[49] Protestant seminary students did join the democracy marchers in a few cities in May 1989, but nothing like that has occurred since. Of course no non-state organizations have been able to establish an audible public voice; against that background there is no reason to expect that Protestants could have done so.

Despite this extremely modest public presence, there is some debate as to whether the very existence of a substantial number of believers organized into supportive local communities constitutes a form of "civil society." A recent thoughtful discussion of this question concludes that although it does not and probably will not oppose the Communist Party or play any formal political role, Protestantism in China does indeed "constitute part of an emerging 'civil society' in China in the sense that the ongoing struggle to claim an autonomous space for religious activity is at the core of the Protestant experience, both in the open and in the autonomous churches."[50] This quest for space could have political consequences in the future, although it does not seem to now.

Protestantism and Socio-economic Change

If it ever was true in the 19th century that Chinese Protestant converts to Christianity were poor and marginalized, that picture began to change at the turn of the century. Largely through the social mobility provided by the Protestant school system established by foreign missions, prosperous middle-class urban congregations began to develop early in the 20th century, especially in the coastal cities of Shandong, Zhejiang and

48. The Amity Foundation was created in the 1980s to give the Protestant church an entrée into society. It is closely linked to the TSPM/CCC, but its board of directors includes non-Church people, even non-Christians. The foundation maintains an overseas co-ordination office in Hong Kong, and publishes a bimonthly bulletin there in English, *Amity News Service*.

49. In the early part of the 20th century, in some areas Chinese Protestants were extremely influential in local and national politics, effectively making their views known on a whole range of national issues. See Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China 1857–1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). In the 1930s and 1940s the fact that Chiang Kai-shek and members of his family and entourage were Christians gave Chinese Church leaders occasional special access to the ear of government.

50. Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 214. *Ibid.* pp. 209–214 discusses many aspects of this issue. Also see Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), and Kenneth Dean, "Ritual and space: civil society or popular religion?" in Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 172–192.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fujian.[51] In some of these same cities, by the 1990s the resurgence of Protestantism seemed linked to the market economy. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 1995 that in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, where some think that as many as 10 per cent of the population are Christians: "Just as they drink Coke and carry Motorola pagers, entrepreneurs show off their cosmopolitan savvy by erecting the finest houses of worship. Taxi drivers sermonize passengers. Factory foremen lure their workers to Sunday services. So the Chinese people are discovering what Max Weber theorized long ago: capitalism and Christianity can be self-reinforcing."[52]

This portrait of urban Protestants, whether or not it is representative of more than a small portion of those believers who live in relatively prosperous coastal enclaves like Wenzhou, is certainly not true of rural believers. Many of them are extremely poor, and for them their adherence to Protestantism is less a manifestation of status than a strategy for survival. Those believers who have joined the throngs of workers migrating from rural to urban China, and who live day-to-day by temporary labour opportunities, constitute a very different social and cultural element in the urban Protestant community from the established middle-class congregations. Are these workers supported socially and psychologically by the rural communities whence they came, associating with fellow believers from the same locales, like them sojourners in the urban day-labour market? Do they attend established churches, whether TSPM or autonomous? Do those churches welcome them? What of those rural migrants who are already members of a heterodox sect? Do they find fellow sectarians in the cities? Do they convert to more orthodox Christianity? And what of those migrant workers who were not believers before their move to the city; are they attracted to the community and mutual support of Protestant congregations? The size of the recent and present population shift from countryside to city makes this a very interesting set of questions, not just for Protestantism but for other religions as well.[53]

China has finally joined the World Trade Organization. That may mean even more rapid economic and social change as, under the pressure of international competition, state-owned industries and the entire public sector shrink even more rapidly and private enterprises and economic networks grow. This might constitute an opportunity for further expansion of Protestantism in China. As a Chinese business and technocratic class in urban China becomes more like its counterparts in Singapore, Penang, Vancouver and Silicon Valley, the growth of Protestantism in all

51. Daniel H. Bays, "A Chinese Christian 'public sphere'? Socioeconomic mobility and the formation of urban middle class Protestant communities in the early twentieth century," in Kenneth G. Lieberthal, Shuen-fu Lin and Ernest P. Young (eds.), *Constructing China: The Interaction of Culture and Economics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1997), pp. 101–117. This is also an important theme of Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants*.

52. 16 June 1995, article by Joseph Kahn, "China's Christians mix business and God: Wenzhou church thrives on new capitalists' wealth," cited in Bays, "Chinese Christian 'public sphere'," p. 101.

53. For the different rural and urban worlds of Chinese Catholicism, see Madsen, *China's Catholics*, especially ch. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000299 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of those places outside China may constitute a model for its future religious trajectory within China as well, at least in urban areas.

Conclusions

In their 1993 study, Hunter and Chan had one large definitive conclusion, that "Chinese Protestantism is now a sustainable force." They also had a more speculative conclusion, that "China may become an increasingly important part of the world Protestant community."[54] The correctness of their first conclusion is confirmed by the picture drawn here of the state of Chinese Protestantism in 2001. The size, resources and virtually nation-wide presence of the Protestant movement makes it one of the most important of non-governmental entities in China today. This is true despite the divisions and tensions which exist within Protestantism, and despite the failure so far of its leaders and institutions to make more than a faint contribution to public discourse on national issues.

Protestantism seems thoroughly rooted in Chinese society, with some aspects of it strongly reflecting affinity to traditional cultural patterns and others appealing to modernity. It offers varied appeals to its followers: its beliefs provide an explanation of suffering, an ethical code and a promise of salvation, all at a much cheaper cost than traditional rituals in local communities, because of less expense for ritual offerings, operas and feasts. Socially, it provides fellowship in a wide variety of organizational forms, from small home groups to large congregations. Yet it also offers personal affirmation and, especially for women and young people, an outlet for their energies and development of musical, organizational or preaching skills. For example, numbers of rural teenagers have found in networks of Protestant groups a vocation of travelling evangelism. Psychologically, different forms of Protestantism can offer for intellectuals or the urban middle class an identification with the West and modernization, or an eschatological prospect which may appeal to poor peasants left behind by the economic reforms.[55]

In their attitudes towards and relationships with Protestants outside China, Chinese Protestants take a variety of positions. Although the Chinese Church has long since ended its formerly close ties to the Western missionary movement and (for the most part) its aura of being a foreign religion, TSPM leaders and publications sometimes speak as though Western Christians and outside evangelization of China were still a threat to the independence of the Chinese Church. They speak of the importance of the three-self ideal, and denounce outside organizations which attempt to "infiltrate" China by establishing links with autonomous groups. At the same time the TSPM and CCC, supported by the govern-

54. Quotations from Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, pp. 278, 280.

55. Yamamori and Chan, *Witnesses to Power*, pp. xiv–xvi, have an extensive list of factors which help explain the growth of Protestantism.

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ment, try to maintain good relations with churches around the world, and warmly welcome foreign church leaders who wish to visit China. The CCC was admitted to the World Council of Churches in 1991, Chinese seminarians study in the West, and outside assistance enabled the building of a modern press in Nanjing to print large quantities of Bibles and other Protestant literature. The Amity Foundation assists in the placement of foreign teachers at Chinese schools that otherwise could not afford them. For their part, some autonomous Protestant communities also have an often lively intercourse with evangelical organizations based outside China. These organizations bring in ("smuggle," as the TSPM sees it) Bibles and other literature, provide money or other resources, conduct short-term classes or training, and altogether carry on a range of contacts that are considered by Chinese Church and Party authorities to be both illicit and an infringement of Chinese sovereignty.[56]

In my view, all these various foreign contacts do not constitute diminishment of the extent to which Protestantism has been domesticated in Chinese society in the past few decades. The majority of Chinese Christians were converted by other Chinese, not by foreign missionaries, even before 1949, and that is overwhelmingly true today. Christian groups outside China can participate in the further development of the Protestant movement within China in various ways – by sending teachers or other "foreign experts" to fill educational or training needs, by assisting activities of either TSPM or autonomous Protestant groups in China, or by evangelizing Chinese students and scholars who come to the West for training.[57] But none of these outside elements is essential to the continued viability and growth of Chinese Protestantism, which has established its own momentum of development on the basis of its own resources.

To view Chinese Protestantism on the broadest scale, as part of a world-wide phenomenon, it is apparent that it has certain features in common with the Protestant movement in other parts of the world in recent decades. In its piety, its concern for both salvation and tangible this-worldly benefits, its relentless sectarian diversity within a context of disintegration of old denominational affiliations, and its association with an expanding market economy, Chinese Protestantism has much in common with world-wide trends. Even the predilection towards Pentecostalism, on the surface "unmodern," insofar as it facilitates individual self-development, can be associated with adaptation to modernizing economic change, as it has been in Latin America.[58] Within the past few decades Christianity in its Protestant and Catholic expressions alike has become a primarily non-Western religion in terms of both numbers of adherents and local practice. For the near future it may be more useful to view Chinese Protestants as part of that new centre of gravity outside

56. Yamamori and Chan, *Witnesses to Power*, pp. xxi–xxii.

57. There is a wide range of Protestant individuals and organizations outside China who engage in various forms of such activities.

58. This point is made in Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 215.

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Europe and North America, rather than to discuss it in terms and categories more familiar in the West but now increasingly distant from Chinese reality.[59]

59. For example, even terms like Pentecostalism, while used to describe more or less similar phenomena world-wide, when used in some places outside the West (including China, in my opinion) are "imported concepts." Noll, "The globalization of Christianity," p. 4.

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