

ABSTRACT

Toward an Understanding of the Prosperity of Protestantism in Contemporary China

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This dissertation answered the question: How did Protestantism survive and even flourish in contemporary China under the pressure of rigid religious policies issued by the atheist Chinese government? Three sociological theoretic frameworks were applied to test in the Chinese case: demand-side model developed from Weberian tradition, supply-side model incorporating economic model, and consideration of religious regulation. In a modernizing world, external factors are indispensable in this discussion, such as urbanization and globalization. This dissertation therefore analyzed the prosperity of Protestantism in contemporary China from three perspectives: individuals at micro-level as the demand-side, Protestant institutions at meso-level as the supply-side, and government regulations and other factors at macro-level as social context.

This dissertation employed literature review, theoretical inference, and personal interviews as research methodology trying to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of Protestantism in contemporary China. It reached the conclusion that

the prosperity of Protestantism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and cannot be appropriately interpreted without taking all aspects into account.

Toward an Understanding of the Prosperity of Protestantism in Contemporary China

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	viii
DEDICATION	ix
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
Theoretical Framework	5
Structure of the Dissertation	16
Summary	18
CHAPTER TWO: Chinese Religious Policy and Ideology	21
Historical Background	22
Contemporary Organizational Framework	29
Important Religious Policies	34
Ideological Context	42
Confucianism and Skepticism among Intellectuals and Rulers	42
Marxism-Leninism and Chinese Practice	46
Implications on Religious Market	59
Summary	63
CHAPTER THREE: A Survey of Protestantism in China	66
One Lord, Two Churches	69
Three-Self Movement in Early Days of Chinese Protestantism	69
The Split between Three-Self Church and House Church	72

Two Emerging Believer Groups	81
Protestantism's Appeal to Contemporary Chinese People	83
Demand Side – The Increase of Spiritual Need in China	83
Supply Side – Protestantism as a Transcendent Religion	88
Supply Side – Protestantism as Congregation	90
Social Contextual Factor – Celebrity Effects	92
Social Contextual Factor – Protestantism in an Urbanizing China	94
Social Contextual Factor – Protestantism in a Globalizing World	96
Summary: Protestantism in Modernizing China	98
CHAPTER FOUR: A Study on Conversion among Chinese Protestants	101
Some Methodological Limitations	103
Finding Christ in China	105
Summary: Chinese Protestants – A Diverse Group	121
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion	125
BIBLIOGRAPHY	130

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Conversion Motivation by Conversion Age

106

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Science
CCC	China Christian Council
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
KMT	Kuomintang
NCC	National Christian Council of China
PRC	People's Republic of China
RAB	Religious Affairs Bureau
RAD	Religious Affairs Division
SARA	State Administration for Religious Affairs of PRC
TSPM	Three-Self Patriotic Movement
UFWD	United Front Work Department
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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To My Beloved Family in Blood and in God

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On Sunday mornings, every church and meeting point in China is fully packed with people who are baptized or are merely curious. It is said that “on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe.”¹ The service schedule of a single church usually lasts from early morning at 8 am to around 3 pm in the afternoon. The clergy must arrange at least three services per day to meet the needs of believers – there are simply too many to worship together at the same time. Most churches even provide one or two more services on Saturdays, sometimes in Latin or English. During the service, people sing hymns devoutly, praise God gratefully, and listen to sermons carefully. These Chinese Protestants have different backgrounds, but they all choose to attend church service on Sunday morning instead of staying at home watching television. The future of Protestantism in contemporary China seems promising.

It was, however, not always this way. According to official statistics, in the early 1950s, there were about one million Protestants worshipping in some twenty thousand churches and numerous meeting points in mainland China. Starting from 1955, government started acting harshly against religion in general. During the Cultural

¹ Daniel H. Bays, “Chinese Protestant Christianity Today,” *The China Quarterly* 174(2) (2003): 488–504. 488.

Revolution, a campaign was launched against old ideas, culture, customs and habits, so religious institutions as a part of the targets were completely shut down, sometimes with violence. Many Protestants turned underground and continued to secretly gather for worship. It was estimated that there were much fewer than one million Protestants in China by 1979.² Since many churches reopened after 1979, Chinese Protestantism has been experiencing a dramatic growth since the 1980s. Although the exact number of Chinese Protestants today remains unclear, the estimations made by scholars and institutions are stunning: It ranges from 20 million to over 100 million.³

Underneath this vibrant Protestant wave, several potential obstacles confront Protestantism, hindering it from achieving a more significant role in the Chinese public arena. Firstly, the religious policies are clearly negative and greatly limit the social role that Protestantism or religion in general can play in China. Secondly, the division within Protestantism may largely weaken its strength in fulfilling its social role. The subtle relationship between officially endorsed churches, the so-called Three-Self Church, and illegal autonomous churches, namely House Church, complicates the religious map

² Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-2. Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93-122, 103.

³ Further details will be discussed in chapter 3. Abundant literature on Chinese Protestantism addressed the difficulties in estimating the exact number of Protestant population in China. For example, Ze Jin and Yonghui Qiu (ed.), *Blue Book of Religions* (Social Sciences Academic Press (Beijing, China), 2010. 191. Pedro C. Moreno (ed.), *Handbook on Religious Liberty Around the World* (Charlottesville, VA: Rutherford Institute, 1996), available from <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/rihand/China.html>, and Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Harmin (ed.), *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

and the church-state relations in China.⁴ The former is led by the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and its ecclesiastical extension – the China Christian Council (CCC), and the latter is composed of underground churches and household meeting spots with loose institutional structure and scattered chaotic leadership. Thirdly, the Reform and Opening starting from 1979 dramatically transformed Chinese society in all aspects. As material life changed greatly, spiritual needs also changed, as well as people’s core value system. Additionally, in a globalizing world, influences from various sources abroad form a double-edged sword to Chinese Protestants. On the one hand, they can provide more financial and spiritual support, and hence more bargaining possibilities at the negotiation table with the government. Gradually, the Chinese government would have to internalize some internationally agreed norms on religious freedom, and consequently loosen the control over Chinese Protestants. On the other hand, close connections with overseas religious or non-religious groups would possibly thrust Chinese Protestants into a future with stricter control by the government.

Challenges certainly cannot conceal the progress that both Chinese Protestants and the Chinese government have made in the past decades. The development of Protestantism forced the government to face these challenges seriously for the first time since 1949. Certainly still inadequate in many aspects, the Chinese government has unexpectedly, yet positively, met the needs of various religious groups by issuing several

⁴ In this dissertation, “Three-Self Church” is used to refer to a collective of this category of churches, while “Three-Self churches” is used to refer to them as plural. The usage is the same as to House Church and House churches.

feasible regulations or plans.⁵ As the government's former greatest concern in maintaining social stability, the Chinese Protestants undoubtedly benefited the most from the modification of the government's attitude. The relationship between church and state has thus turned from suppression towards acknowledgement and cooperation, though reluctantly.

This study is an attempt to answer the question: How did Protestantism survive and even flourish in contemporary China under the pressure of rigid religious policies issued by the atheist Chinese government?

This dissertation will utilize the two sociological approaches of supply-side model and demand-side model as the main theoretical framework to interpret the Protestant resurgence in contemporary China with a case study of three Three-Self Church in China. In other words, in this highly regulated, instead of "free marketplace," different religious traditions compete with each other for a larger share of the religious population while experiencing constant governmental interference. Therefore, how could Protestantism most efficiently defeat all the other competitors with the fastest growth of member

⁵ On April 13th, 2009, China released the *National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009-2010)*, becoming the 26th country to respond to the call by the United Nations. Three hundred and five characters out of this document addressed religious freedom, requiring the implementation of religious policies issued in recent years and acknowledging the positive function of religious believers and organizations in social charity. It appeared a reconfirmation of reconciliation proposed by President Hu Jintao at the 17th National Congress of Chinese Communist Party, where he recognized the positive aspects of religion in constructing a socialist China for the first time in the history of the Party. This opinion was subsequently adopted into the new party constitution as "carrying out government policies in religious work and uniting religious believers to contribute in economic construction." *National Human Rights Action Plan of China*, available from http://www.humanrights.cn/cn/dt/gnbb/t20090413_438873.htm, and the part of Hu Jintao's Work Report with emphasis on religious work is available from http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content_6938568_5.htm.

population? Indeed, two prerequisites justifying this project are: First, there are demands for spiritual supplies, and secondly, the marketplace exists and is open to both suppliers of spiritual goods and demanders searching for spiritual goods. This project hence is a study of Chinese Protestantism at three levels. First, at the microscopic individual level, it tries to locate the “source of religious commitment”⁶ among contemporary Chinese Protestants. Second, at the meso-level, it explores the development of religious organizations. Third, at the macroscopic level, it attempts to identify the relationship between the prosperity of Protestantism in China and external factors, such as modernization.

This introduction will now address two methodological issues: Theoretical framework and the organizational structure of the dissertation.

Theoretical Framework

Desecularization would be a meaningless concept without the hypothesis of secularization as a powerful rival. Secularization can be understood as a simple idea that the importance of religion will decline in both public and private spheres as modernization moves further,⁷ although, in fact, it encompasses much more complex

⁶ Charles Y. Glock, “The Dimensions of Religious Commitment,” in Charles Y. Glock (ed.), *Religion in Sociological Perspective: Essays in the Empirical Study of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), 9-11.

⁷ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 1-18. Peter L. Berger, “Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today,” *Sociology of Religion* 62 (4) (2001): 443-454. Grace Davie, *The Sociology of Religion* (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007).

elements and can appear in different forms.⁸ Secularization has always been a fascinating phenomenon and also a haunting term in the sociology of religion, since the days of the “Founding Fathers” of sociology of religion – Marx, Weber and Durkheim.⁹ These three great thinkers understood and explained the phenomenon of secularization from three different approaches. In later days, the worldly renowned sociologist Peter Berger combined these approaches and developed them within his own framework of social construction of reality.

Karl Marx took religion as a dependent variable whose nature and forms would be determined primarily by economic development. For Marx, religion is only a distorted and false reflection of the reality, a form of alienation, and it disguises the exploitative relationship in capitalism between employers and employees.¹⁰ Religion is necessary as appeasement to the people as long as the real injustice of capitalist society remains concealed, so here follows the famous quote “religion is the opium of the people”. Marx himself did not suggest any violent coercive eradication of religion by men, but his arguments implied the possibility for religion to diminish and vanish along with

⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967). Karel Dobbelaere, “Secularization: A Multi-dimensional Concept,” *Current Sociology*, 29 (2) (1981): 3-153. Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). In the conclusion of his book, Casanova accurately captured the core idea of secularization as a multi-dimensional process: “secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices, and secularization as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere.” (*Public Religion in the Modern World*, 211)

⁹ The term of “Founding Fathers” was used by Grace Davie in *The Sociology of Religion*, 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

economic development. Unfortunately, this secondary implication later became the major theoretical foundation and source for justifying Marxist regimes' religious policies, clearly reflected in the Soviet Union and PRC.

Max Weber viewed the relationship between religion and material interests in a more complex way. He strongly disagreed with the simplistic one-way dependency between these two elements; instead, he argued that a set of more complex variables along with economic development caused social phenomena, including religion. Different cultural and social conditions may lead to different forms and substances of religion. The relationship between religion and material interests is mutually dependent and reinforced. Therefore, modernization, a phenomenon involving various spheres of society, including the growth of humans' rationality with the development of natural science, would lead to the "disenchantment" of the world, which means the decline of the connection between religion and society.¹¹ Weber understood secularization from a more substantive perspective, and proposed a very insightful interpretation of secularization based on the complex relationship between religion and society.

Emile Durkheim approached the idea of secularization from a functionalist perspective. He was first and foremost convinced that religion is indispensable in realizing a social function: Binding the people together to form a society. Therefore, he responded to the challenge of modernization by interpreting religion primarily as a

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (London, UK: Methuen, 1963)

“social function performer,” which dramatically decreased the supernatural nature or, in other words, the substance of religion. He argued that religion could evolve with other factors in a society, and as a symbol of social solidarity, religion would always be present as long as it could perform its social function as the “sacred spiritual glue.”¹² His definition of religion mainly as “the sacred” confirmed a substantive aspect of religion, but he placed greater emphasis on the social function aspect instead. His viewpoints broadened the potential and possible content and forms of religion as a social function, strongly influenced later development in sociological and educational studies and more.

Both Weber and Durkheim’s arguments imply that religion in its traditional meaning is replaceable in different ways. Weber’s view suggested that science would replace religion as a new interpreter of world order in a more rational way, while Durkheim’s view implied that religion could be anything performing the social function as “spiritual glue.” Grounded in their arguments, an accurate definition of religion became almost impossible based on a much broader spectrum of phenomena with religious substance, form or function, and the concept of “substitute” for religion became possible.

In Peter Berger’s arguments, religion is defined as “the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established.”¹³ As an important part in the dialectic relationship between humans and society, i.e. externalization, objectivation, internalization, religion has significant meaning in socialization. It provides both meaning of life and shield

¹² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London, UK: Harper Collins, 1976)

¹³ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 25.

against chaos for humans, and at the same time, it maintains social order by connecting the world made by human beings with the external world, and bestows cosmological significance to the former. Through this process of social construction, Berger integrated the views of Weber and Durkheim by interpreting religion as a phenomenon with both transcendent meaning in individual life and functional meaning in social reality. This understanding infers that religion in its traditional transcendent meaning can be replaced by other forms of ideologies providing cosmological interpretations and meanings to individual life, and in its functional meaning, any of these ideologies can be a form of religion. Secularization is a kind of withdrawal of traditional institutionalized religion, especially Christianity in the Western world, from both public and private spheres along with other social changes caused by capitalist economic development, although its effect is less obvious in individual consciousness.¹⁴ Religion has two options – rejection and adaptation – to survive a secularizing world.¹⁵

However, since the 1990s, based on more and more empirical evidence observed around the world, scholars began to reconsider the validity of secularization theory, and gradually switched to the “rival” camp of desecularization, including leading scholars in secularization such as Peter Berger and David Martin. Rather than secularizing, they argued that as the process of modernization moves forward, this world is no less religious

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 1-18. Peter L. Berger, “Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today,” *Sociology of Religion* 62 (4) (2001): 443-454.

than before, and in many parts of it, such as in Latin America and Africa,¹⁶ people are even more religious than before.

This fact, therefore, initiated a controversial debate in the sociology of religion. After acknowledging the unexpected desecularizing trend, a more important question emerged: How should we understand this phenomenon? Two modes of interpretations came into the picture: Supply-side model and demand-side model.

In the 1990s, a group of sociologists emerged promoting a “new paradigm”¹⁷ to interpret the ongoing resurgence of religion worldwide (based on American experiences) with an economic approach.¹⁸ The subsystem of religious economy “consists of all the religious activity going on in any society, including a ‘market’ of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents, and the religious culture offered by the organizations.”¹⁹ Generally speaking, this market, or supply-side model, is built upon a presumption that the demand of religion is constant, and an inspiration from capitalist economic *laissez-faire*. More explicitly, since the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ R. Stephen Warner, “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States,” in R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 18-62.

¹⁸ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (3) (1994): 230 – 252. Anthony J. Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Roman Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Paul Froese, “Hungary for Religion: A Supply-Side Interpretation of the Hungarian Religious Revival,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40(2) (2001): 251–68.

¹⁹ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 193.

demand is constant, then the pluralization of competitors with little state regulation and lack of monopoly will lead to the prosperity of the religious marketplace. Despite criticisms,²⁰ this argument vividly describes and explains the religious situation in the US after the emergence and prosperity of denominationalism. It also provides a helpful perspective from which to observe and understand religious development worldwide against the setting of pluralism. It denies the argument of “old paradigm,” i.e. secularization, which identified pluralism as the major “killer” of religion, or in Berger’s term, the “taken-for-granted certainties.” On the contrary, religious economy considers pluralism as the causal reason for religious prosperity.

However, the fact that the application of religious economy currently is restricted within the Western world – more specifically, Christendom – questions its generalizability. The commercialization of religion as a non-special “spiritual goods” on market for “spiritual shoppers” to choose from, based on their “rational choice,” oversimplifies the complex relationship between religion and humans and ignores the cultural differences among societies. Pluralization of spiritual goods surely can meet more shoppers’ needs and therefore increase religiosity as a whole; on the other hand, the phenomena of

²⁰ Mark Chaves, “On the Rational Choice Approach to Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1) (1995): 98 – 104. Stephen Sharot, “Beyond Christianity: A Critique of the Rational Choice Theory of Religion from a Weberian and Comparative Religious Perspective.” *Sociology of Religion* 63(4) (2002): 427 – 454. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

“believing without belonging”²¹ and “belonging without believing”²² can seriously reduce the measurability, and moreover, validity of religious economy.

Interestingly enough, as a major contributor in the secularization camp, Berger proposed a “marginal differentiation” market model in one of his early works²³. His argument is that under the circumstance of ecumenicity, “denominationalism can thus be understood as highly functional in a situation where one wants to remain competitive in spite of product standardization”.²⁴ Stated differently, in inevitable religious competition due to the exposure to pluralism, the only way to survive is to repeatedly consolidate one’s own religious identity by emphasizing the “marginal differentiation” in addition to providing a standardized product called “religion-in-general.”²⁵

The demand-side model is directly derived from Berger’s early works, especially *The Sacred Canopy*. His understanding of religion was clearly elaborated in that book, and briefly described in discussions above. The foundation of his theoretical system remains intact and still very powerful, but the change in his views of pluralism made him reconsider secularization. Basically, he believes that some arguments of secularization are still valid, but the relationship between modernity and religion is rather complex.

²¹ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994).

²² Peter L. Berger, “Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today.”

²³ Peter L. Berger, “A Market Model for the Analysis of Ecumenicity,” *Social Research* 30 (1963): 77–93.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁵ Martin Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York, NY: Harper & Bros, 1958).

“Modernity, for fully understandable reasons, undermines all the old certainties; uncertainty is a condition that many people find very hard to bear; therefore, any movement (not only a religious one) that promises to provide or to renew certainty has a ready market.”²⁶ Moreover, pluralization brought by modernity “may or may not be secularizing, depending on other factors in a given situation.”²⁷ Although the demand-side model has been very much marginalized after the supply-side model took over the sociology of religion, it emphasizes the necessity of religion in humans’ lives. And by the renewed understanding of the role of pluralism in the modernized society, its interpretive ability on the phenomenon of worldwide desecularization is undeniably strong.

Besides these two models, in highly-regulated religious markets like China, the factor of state regulation cannot be neglected. As Finke pointed out, “regulation restricts competition by changing the incentives and opportunities for religious producers (churches, preachers, revivalists, etc.) and the viable options for religious consumers (church members).”²⁸ In the discussion of the role of state regulation in the Chinese religious market, Fenggang Yang proposed a very interesting and inspiring model: Three markets of religion in China. In this model, Yang modified the supply-side model

²⁶ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” 7.

²⁷ Peter L. Berger, “Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today,” 449.

²⁸ Roger Finke, “The Consequences of Religious Competition: Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change,” in L. A. Young (ed.), *Assessing Rational Choice Theories of religion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 50.

by adding the “state” as an external player, and made it more applicable to the situation in China. His basic ideas can be generalized as follows: Increased state religious regulation will triple the religious market, because a part of the “red market” (officially permitted) will split and turn to the underground “black market” (officially banned); due to the restriction on the red market and suppression on the “black market,” the “gray market” will emerge with an ambiguous official status between these two markets, and the “gray market” will increase as the state regulation becomes stronger.²⁹

Yang’s model ignores the possibility that the “gray market” can also flow to the other two markets in given circumstances, and facing state regulation, religions have two options instead of one: Active response as well as passive reaction. The adjustment of these three markets is simply a passive reaction, and it appears that religion can do nothing but adapt itself to state regulation. In practice, however, state regulation to some degree can stimulate the increase of religion because of reasons such as the sense of purity, truth, martyrdom etc., and reinforced state regulation at the local level would “squeeze” out religious activists and force them to travel nationwide with religious seeds, which will lead to the prosperity of religion in a broader range. Hence, state regulation and religion actually have a dialectic relationship rather than a single-direction flow of influence.

²⁹ Fenggang Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93-122.

In a more recent work, Yang proposed an interesting model to observe Chinese religious market – shortage economy model.³⁰ Yang basically adopted some major ideas from economist Janos Kornai on shortage economy:

Shortage of supply is chronic and systemic in the “socialist system” under Communist rule, which is characterized by shortage in consumer goods, long lines in shops, long delays in services, and shortages throughout the production process. “The shortage phenomena under the classical socialist system are general, frequent, intensive, and chronic; the system is a shortage economy.”³¹

Except applying this shortage economy model to interpret Chinese religious situation, Yang also revealed the impact of a “central-planning” socialist model on the demand of religious believers. The status of atheism as part of social orthodox ideology severely suppressed Chinese people’s spiritual demand, and stopped the supply of spiritual goods. Ironically, the suppression of demand and suspension of supply strengthened the desire for spiritual goods when they again became available. This model also described the interaction between monopoly and market vitality from another perspective. As long as the monopoly remains, the religious market stays at a low vitality with little demand; once does the monopoly collapse, all “customers” will be released and submerge the market with demand. The market will therefore gain a high vitality since all suppliers will compete with each other for the suddenly increased demand.

³⁰ Fenggang Yang, “Religion in China under Communism: A Shortage Economy Explanation,” *Journal of Church and State* Vol. 52 No. 1 (2010): 3-33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

This model provides a new approach to interpret the resurgence of religion in China during the reform-era, and is very helpful to analyze the dialectic relationship between the state control and the change of both demand and supply on religious market in China.

Structure of the Dissertation

Following the introduction, chapter two is a discussion of religious regulation of the Chinese government, which is one of three major factors analyzed in this dissertation to interpret the prosperity of Chinese Protestantism. It first reviews the historical background of the tension in church-state relations in PRC and then introduces two main government agencies responsible for religious affairs – the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). Two fundamental documents in contemporary Chinese religious affairs are, ironically, documents issued by the Central Committee of CCP instead of laws. Document 19 and Document 6 prescribes the basic tone of other religious policies: freedom of belief, restraint of practice. The discussion of ideological context, in which these documents were born, helps to understand why the Chinese government has been so nervous and rigid on religious affairs and refuses to deal with them more seriously. Finally, it is an inconvenient but unavoidable fact that CCP is also a spiritual supplier on the market competing for a larger share. Different from other competitors though, CCP utilizes the privilege derived from another identity, the supervisor of this market, to consolidate its monopoly. This attempt, however, is doomed along with the demise of the Soviet Bloc, which was the precursor of the bankruptcy of communism worldwide.

Chapter three is a brief overview of Protestantism in China. It reviews “three-self” movement in early days of Chinese Protestantism for independence from foreign interference and its continuance in PRC era, leading to the split between Three-Self Church and House Church due to the involvement of government. The split within the group of Chinese Protestants is hence a reactive consequence of non-separation of church and state. These two fractures of Chinese Protestants, however, are both developing fast. Additionally, two new types of Chinese Protestants are emerging: entrepreneurs and intellectual elites. The former group is represented by private business owners in southeastern coast areas, and the latter group is delegated by college students in major universities. The emergence of these two groups marks a turning point in the history of Chinese Protestantism. It is no longer a religion for disadvantaged people who are old, female or illiterate. The second part of chapter three focuses on analyzing appeals of Protestantism to Chinese people under modern conditions. Both empirical and theoretical evidence refer to the same direction: Protestantism thrives in China because spiritual demand of Chinese people has been rising in the modernizing China, and the theological and institutional characteristics of Protestantism properly and precisely meet the demand. Conditions at micro, meso, and macro levels actually benefit Protestantism more than any other religious traditions.

Chapter four is a further demonstration of the change of personal spiritual pursuit at the individual level. This chapter is based on my fieldwork in China from November 2008 to April 2009, with interviews taken in several Three-Self churches in four

provinces, Yunnan, Anhui, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu. By focusing on this group, I simply am attempting to reveal some of its characteristics, based upon ethnographic data, not to offer any conclusive statements on the issue. This chapter is supplementary to the previous chapter by providing some personal conversion experiences at individual level. It shows the diversity of conversion motivation among Chinese Protestants, which is continuously changing through time to adjust to the external environment.

Chapter five is the conclusion. It reviews the whole project and restates the core idea of this dissertation. It also gives some suggestions for future research. The scope of this research is limited to one aspect of Chinese Protestantism, and further study is always needed to explore this fascinating phenomenon.

Summary

This dissertation will explore the reasons leading to the Protestant resurgence in contemporary China, and locate the source of religious commitment of Chinese Protestants using supply-side and demand-side models. This research is expected to forge a new path in the debate between supply-side and demand-side over desecularization. The picture of desecularization would not be complete unless incorporating these two approaches. The demand-side model reveals humans' intrinsic need for religion as a shield against the external chaos. This need, however, is not as constant as the supply-side model assumes. It may change through time due to various influences. The supply-side model, however, points out external conditions that are helpful in fulfilling this need for religion, and how these conditions can bring the activity

of religion to a higher level. Chinese Protestantism would not flourish in the absence of either one of these two elements.

Specifically stated, the central idea of this dissertation is: Only by both supply-side and demand-side, plus consideration of state regulation, can the prosperity of Protestantism in contemporary China be appropriately understood. China is experiencing an unprecedented process of modernization, which dramatically pluralizes Chinese people's lives and brings various uncertainties with numerous possibilities. After faith in Communism and Maoism collapsed, a spiritual vacuum emerged consequently, and the Reform and Opening made the influx of multiple ideological substitutes, including religion, possible. Earnest demand and pluralized supply lead to the prosperity of the religious market in China. Additionally, inevitable state regulation in China can either weaken or strengthen the development of religion depending on the situation with remarkable regional variations.

Additionally, this dissertation will contribute some new perspectives on Three-Self Church and its ordinary members in the context of global desecularization. The majority of existing literature pays more attention to House Church and its members due to the concern of human rights issue in China. Three-Self Church, the "stronger" in reality, hence became the "weaker" in academic research, and the bias against the church as an institution mistakenly hurts innocent church members who do not care much about the differences between Three-Self Church and House Church as long as they are satisfied with the church service. Chinese Protestants attending Three-Self Church

services are consequently much less represented compared to their counterparts in House Church, and sometimes are even misunderstood as default CCP advocates. Given this misunderstanding, it is necessary to conduct further research on the group of Three-Self Church attendees to decrease the bias against them.

CHAPTER TWO

Chinese Religious Policy and Ideology

In the November, 2008 issue of *The Atlantic*, an article titled “Their Own Worst Enemy” appeared with an interesting subtitle: “China is Stunningly Bad at Managing Its Own Reputation. Here’s Why.”¹ The article described the Chinese government’s neurosis in public administration and decision-making, and interpreted with some clichés. The interesting part of it though, is beyond the scope of this article. The conclusion that “China is stunningly bad at managing its own reputation” can be generalized to other issues such as religious administration – in Chinese government’s own term.

The Chinese government is quite inflexible as to the issue of religious freedom, and frequently impresses the public with an image of controlling and suppressing its citizens by coercion. Vast literature sources trace the Chinese government’s hostility toward religion, especially those done in early days.² The Chinese government seems very determined in establishing and implementing religious regulations according to their own standards without taking domestic and international objective environment and consequences into consideration. It is more confusing that the government is so

¹ James Fallows, “Their Own Worst Enemy: China is Stunningly Bad at Managing its Own Reputation. Here’s Why.” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Nov., 2008: 72-78.

² For example: George N. Patterson, *Christianity in Communist China* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1969). Francis Price Jones, *The Church in Communist China: A Protestant Appraisal* (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1962).

unwilling to make changes in religious administration when not doing so seriously undermines its international reputation. In many other aspects, however, the government knows very well the importance of *jiegui* (接轨, to be consistent with general international norms or rules). Selective adoption of international norms reflects an important characteristic of the Chinese government in administration – utilitarianism, which is also the main guideline of Chinese political philosophy throughout Chinese history. This chapter will address the following issues: the historical background of the restrictive religious policy in contemporary China, organizational framework, analyses of important items of religious policy, ideological context, and implications on religious market.

Historical Background

The church-state issue is nothing new in China, nor is the tension between these two sectors. Throughout the dynastic history of China, church-state relations seldom occupied a significant status except in occasions related to ethnic relations or political turmoil, such as affirmation of the Dalai Lama in Tibet and the White Lotus Rebellion in Qing Dynasty. The theme of church-state relations during this period was suppression or containment, and this tradition continued to be true after China entering its modern era. As Daniel Bays insightfully pointed out, “government registration and monitoring of religious activities, although irregularly exercised, has been a constant reality of organized religious life in both traditional and modern times.”³ This theme is

³ Daniel H. Bays, “A Tradition of State Dominance,” in Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Harmin (ed.),

unsurprisingly repeated again in the history of People's Republic of China (PRC) after its establishment in 1949.⁴

CCP's religious policy has been modified several times since the foundation of PRC, from an ambitious attempt to bring all religious traditions under control to an aggressive attempt to eradicate religion in general and finally a passive toleration to religion. To some degree, the establishment of PRC in 1949 declared communism based on atheism the orthodox ideology in this country under the rule of CCP. Lifting an atheist banner was seemingly reasonable in the trend of secularization: If religion was going to vanish anyway, why should we not accelerate this process by mobilizing the whole society? As a matter of fact, CCP drafted its religious policy with scientific atheism in mind, showing sympathy to religious believers who are conceived by religion. This scientific atheism

God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2004) 25-39.

⁴ The brief account of historical facts is based on observations made by both Western and Chinese scholars. Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Harmin (ed.), *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); Michael D. Suman, *The Church in China: One Lord, Two Systems* (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2006); Anthony P. B. Lambert, "Post-Tiananmen Chinese Communist Party Religious Policy", *Religion, State and Society* 20 (3 & 4) (1992): 391 – 397; Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China." *The China Quarterly* 174(2) (2003): 317–37; Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China." *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93-122; Ji'an Zhang, "Dui 'Zongjiao shi Renmin de Yapien' zhege Lunduan de Chubu Lijie" (Some Understandings of the Statement of "Religion is the Opium of the People"), *Studies in World Religions (Beijing, China)* 2 (1981): 5 – 12; Ji'an Zhang, "Xuexi Makesi guanyu Zongjiao de jige Jiben Lilun Wenti – Jinian Makesi Shishi Yibai Zhounian" (A Study of Several Basic Theoretical Issues on Religion by Marx: In Commemoration of the Centenary of Marx's Death), *Studies in World Religions (Beijing, China)* 4 (1982): 80 – 88; Zhufeng Luo, *Zhongguo Shehui Zhuyi Shiqi de Zongjiao Wenti (Religious Issues during the Socialist Period of China)* (Shanghai, China: Shanghai Social Science Academy Press, 1987); Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), *Xin Shiqi Zongjiao Gongzuo Wenxian Xuanbian (Selection of Religious Affairs Documents in the New Era)* (Beijing, China: Religious Culture Press, 1995); Xiaowen Ye, *Duo Shijiao Kan Shehui Wenti (Viewing Social Problems from Multiple Perspectives)* (Beijing, China: CCP Central Party School Press, 1997); Xiaowen Ye, *Zongjiao Wenti: Zenme Kan, Zenme Ban (Religious Problem: How to See and How to Do)* (Beijing, China: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2007).

tradition can be traced back to the Enlightenment, and mainly distilled to CCP through Marxism. CCP was loyal to this idea in its early days dealing with religious affairs, and showed toleration to religion. On the other hand, CCP implemented its policies with the inspiration of militant atheism, which originated from Leninism.⁵ By promoting atheism nationwide through all channels available, including official publications, education, and social movements, CCP had been trying very hard to transform PRC into a secular society with a “scientific worldview” by both peaceful and coercive means. It gradually lost control over atheist propaganda, and the “proletarian dictatorship” reached the peak during the Cultural Revolution.⁶

Compared to the Soviet Union, China had not suffered much pain from overt eradication of religion in the first several years. The main objective in religious affairs back then was to remove foreign influences, to regulate and control religious leaders and activities, and therefore to consolidate the orthodox status of communism and consequently, atheism. During this period of time, the main target for Protestantism and Catholicism was to cast off foreign controls, including those from the Vatican and missionaries or foreign clergies. For the other three major religions, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam, it was more important to accomplish socialist reformation and to remove privilege from groups with higher religious status, such as abbots and imams. It was

⁵ Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006), 100.

⁶ Ibid.

decreed that they must not keep any connection with reactionary activists in any forms. One after another, these five major religions founded “patriotic associations” from 1954 to 1957, and accepted the leadership of CCP. The key word appearing in these movements was “patriotism,” which also represented the “purity” in this communist revolution: To be pure, to be patriotic, or to be suppressed.⁷ This was in fact the initiation to sacralize communism.

Starting from 1955, the attitude of the government changed dramatically. The government was threatened by the “reactionary demons” unleashed in the “two-hundred” movement – “the bloom of one hundred flowers, the contention of a hundred schools of thought.” An overwhelming feeling of insecurity seized leaders of CCP, and therefore, they initiated a national social movement of “suppressing reactionary activists,” following with the famous anti-rightist movement starting in 1958. The government changed its previous mild atheist attitude to a more radical one. It stopped waiting for the religion to disappear “one day,” and started to fight against religion more actively. Many religious locations were shut down, restrictions on religious activities and membership were issued, and cradle-to-grave atheist propaganda penetrated through the whole society. Interestingly, not everyone at this time agreed on the negative comments about religion, and a so-called “opium war” broke out between scholars in Northern and Southern China in the 1960s over a fundamental comment of Marx regarding religion:

⁷ The idea of “purity” is borrowed from Barrington Moore, Jr., *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), in which Moore argued that the emphasis of monopoly of virtue and purity embedded in monotheism is the very source of religious and ideological oppression.

“Religion is the opium of the people.” This debate was not about the validity of this dictum or Marxist-Leninist theory of religion; instead, it was an extensive discussion over “the way in which that theory should be interpreted and translated into policy in light of the Chinese experience.”⁸ Unfortunately, this profound reflection about the role of religion in a society did not last long, for the Cultural Revolution hit the Chinese people in 1966. This red tide swept every corner of China and tried to wash away every single piece of people’s memory about religion. A movement called “anti-four-olds,” including old thoughts represented by Confucianism, old cultures, old customs, and old habits justified the eradication of non-communist cultural elements, including religion of course. Nearly all religious locations were shut down, people were forbidden to attend any congregations except for “revolutionary” ones, and the whole country was submerged in a red sea of the Maoist cult. The belief in communism was officially transformed to the worship of Mao as a living god on earth, and Mao, a revolutionary leader, was deified just as any other ancient Chinese emperors.

Including its aftermath, the Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 to 1979, beginning with a “big-character post” by Mao Zedong and ended with the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee introducing an overall Reform and Opening. The influx of novel foreign thoughts diversified spiritual products available and accessible to Chinese people, and consequently challenged the legitimacy of communism as the orthodox

⁸ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 78.

ideology. From then on, since leaders of CCP realized and admitted the longevity of religion in socialist China because of a massive foundation rooted in the people, the mainstream policy thus turned back to regulating and controlling religion within a prescribed frame instead of eradicating it. This change of government's attitude was clearly reflected by a series of documents and regulations issued since 1982, including Document No. 19 and No. 6. However, it did not mean that CCP loosened up the religious marketplace for all providers; quite contrary, at least according to documents and regulations issued, CCP intended to tighten up its control over religion from then on. Obviously, its short-term goal was to weaken or to reduce the influence of religion, but its long-term expectation of the disappearance of religion still remained intact.

Ironically, this expectation hardly outlived religion. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the ideal of Communism along with the authority of CCP collapsed among the Chinese people. A spiritual vacuum emerged in Chinese society, and the vacuum directly led to a chaos in the society. People lost their faith, goal, and direction. Perceiving social moral chaos caused by uncontrolled pursuit of mere material prosperity, many Chinese scholars called for more attention to these issues, and requested a solution.⁹ In 2004, the Chinese government raised the slogan of “building a harmonious

⁹ For example, a Chinese dissident scholar named Kuide Chen presented a paper named “The Modern Destiny of Chinese Humanist Spirit” at a seminar on the Spiritual Life of East Asian Civilizations, emphasizing the necessity of filling the spiritual vacuum in contemporary China. The outline is available from http://blog.boxun.com/hero/chenkuide/112_1.shtml. Another scholar named Xiaozhu Liu proposed that foreign religions such as Christianity would stimulate the development of indigenous Chinese religion and promote Chinese folk religion to fill out the spiritual and moral vacuum. Her main ideas are available from http://blog.boxun.com/hero/liuxiaozhu/85_1.shtml and http://blog.boxun.com/hero/liuxiaozhu/86_1.shtml. Beijing-based *Reading* is a monthly magazine for famous scholars to share their opinions on cultural and social issues with the masses. It is famous for being

society and a harmonious world,” and emphasized the importance of several basic aspects: Democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity, vitality, and environment protection.¹⁰ As a part of its aftermath, a revival of traditional Chinese culture represented by Confucianism and Buddhism appeared in large scale across the country. More interestingly, the Chinese government was the major promoter of these traditional values.¹¹ It was an obvious attempt of the Chinese government to set up a guideline for morality and a frame to contain competing ideologies, including religion.

A huge and dynamic religious marketplace gradually emerged in China, no matter whether CCP was reluctant or not. It just happened without any advanced notice. The ruling party was caught off guard, and obviously needed a long period of time to adjust their policies and adapt themselves into the environment.

the weathervane of the mainstream of Chinese intellectuals’ thoughts. In the spring of 2005, how to understand and solve the social and spiritual crises caused by the moral and spiritual vacuum in China remained to be the central topic of *Reading* for more than three months.

¹⁰ “Building Harmonious Society is Crucial for China's Progress.” June 27, 2005. *People's Daily Online*, available from http://english.people.com.cn/200506/27/eng20050627_192495.html.

¹¹ For example, there is a famous television program named “Lecture Room” broadcast through the biggest official television channel, China Central Television (CCTV), nationwide. This program aimed to popularize traditional Chinese culture. One of the most influential series was “To Understand the Analects of Confucius with Yu Dan,” which was broadcast in 2007. The lecturer, Yu Dan, who was a professor at Beijing Normal University, became a widely known celebrity overnight. She published a book with the same title based on the transcript of the lecture series in the following year, and made the record of over 3 million copies sold. At the same time, there are many extracurricular courses offered for people at all ages on classic Chinese literature and philosophy in major cities. Many parents believe that classic Chinese scriptures may help their children grow better with more knowledge of life.

Contemporary Organizational Framework

Two agencies in the Chinese central government are mainly in charge of religious affairs: The United Front Work Department of CCP Central Committee (UFWD) and State Administration for Religious Affairs of PRC (SARA). The UFWD is a *party* organization designed to implement and promote various political policies regarding united front work, while religious affairs is only one issue among others including ethnic minorities and democratic parties.¹² According to information provided on its website, it recognizes its primary responsibility to be “a functional department, a consultant and assistant in united front work for the CCP Central Committee.”¹³ The SARA, previously known as Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), is a *state* organization concerned with religion and religious policy, under the administration of the State Council. It has been an important government agency as the bureaucracy handles religious affairs at a daily base and has actual and direct connection with religious groups and believers.

Religious believers are a part of the united front according to CCP, as potential allies outside the Party. The united front work is very important for the Proletariat to consolidate political power and achieve military victory, and finally the liberation of all humans. As a major theoretician of the united front, Mao Zedong emphasized the significance of the united front work at all times. In his articles published and speeches given at various occasions, he repeatedly mentioned that proletarians could be liberated

¹² Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking Common Ground*, 66.

¹³ “About Us” at the official website of the UFWD, available from <http://www.zyztb.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/tzb2010/bbjs/201012/690111.html>

only after they liberate all others first. For the sake of this great goal, “proletarians must understand that although they belong to the most enlightened and organized class, they could not succeed by their own power exclusively. To win the final success, they have to unite all possible revolutionary classes and social sectors under various conditions and to form a revolutionary united front.”¹⁴

Guided by this fundamental theory, CCP started the united front work very early. The history of the united front work can be traced back to the World War II in 1937, when CCP initiated an alliance with the Chiang Kai-shek government’s Kuomintang (KMT) to defeat the invasion of Japan.¹⁵ Organizations for the united front work continued to exist to serve different purposes thereafter.

The earliest form of the united front work organizations was the Urban Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, which was established between 1944 and 1945. It was mainly in charge of the united front work in regions occupied by Japanese army, and ceased to work after the victory of the Anti-Japanese War in 1945. By the end of 1946, however, at the beginning of the Chinese Civil War, the CCP Central Committee decided to restart the Urban Work Department “to explore and manage all works in areas under the administration of Chiang Kai-shek’s government.” In September of 1948, the

¹⁴ Mao Zedong, “Chinese Revolution and Chinese Communist Party” (1939), in *Mao Zedong Xuanji (Di'er Juan)* (*Selected Works by Mao Zedong Volume 2*) (Beijing, China: People’s Publishing House, 1991), 645. Other important quotes of Mao on the united front work also can be found at the website of the UFWD of Jiangsu Province, available from http://www.jstz.org.cn/c_08/maozedong/80200212180174.htm.

¹⁵ Referring to the information provided at the website of the UFWD, available from <http://www.zytzb.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/tzb2010/bbjs/201012/690111.html>

CCP Central Committee renamed the Urban Work Department to the United Front Work Department of CCP Central Committee. The new department would manage matters on various issues, including works in region under the rule of KMT, domestic ethnic minority affairs, the united front work aiming at political power, oversea Chinese affairs, and communication with Eastern brethren parties (referring to parties in the Soviet bloc). Additionally, it also would prepare for organizing the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which was for groups and individuals represented in the democratic united front.¹⁶

The UFWD at all administrative levels was gradually set up after 1949. The major responsibility of the UFWD is “to understand the situation, grasp the policy, adjust relationships, and make arrangements for personnel matters.”¹⁷ Two important features of the work of the UFWD are implementation of policies in relationship to various non-CCP groups and surveillance, which is “an important mechanism of control in China's collective society.”¹⁸ For example, in the 1950s, the UFWD was involved in establishing patriotic associations for five major religions. By similar tactics, the

¹⁶ The CPPCC proclaimed the establishment of PRC in 1949 and ratified the “Organic Law” and the “Common Program.” The “Common Program” served as the temporary constitution before a formal Constitution was issued in 1954, and the CPPCC was the highest governmental body until it was superseded by the National People's Congress (NPC) in 1954. Only consultative and the united front functions of the CPPCC retained after that. Referring to information at the website of the CPPCC, available from <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/2011/09/14/ARTI1315989549648824.shtml> and Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 67.

¹⁷ Referring to the information provided at the website of the UFWD, available from <http://www.zyztz.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/tzb2010/bbjs/201012/690111.html> and also in Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 69.

¹⁸ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 69.

UFWD “could monitor religious personnel and activities, and split and weaken religious organizations as the opportunity arose.”¹⁹

Some words from a former deputy-director of the UFWD quoted by Wickeri in his book may offer a better understanding of the importance of united front work to CCP:

We have no way of predicting the future. Will all the countries of the world eventually become socialist? If so, what would be the relationship between the workers, peasants, intellectuals and other groups? How will socialism and communism develop in China? We don't know the answers to these questions, but we can say this: no matter what happens, the Communist Party will always be in a minority, even here in China. There will be changes and progress, but there will always be certain problems between those who belong to the Party and those who do not. Thus, there will be the need to develop unity and to handle relationships between those inside and outside the Party. In this way, the united front will always have a role to play.²⁰

Not to misunderstand the united front work though, the coalition between CCP and non-Party social sectors exists only based on the mutual agreement on a prerequisite: CCP is the party in power, and cannot be challenged politically; otherwise non-Party sectors will be potential enemies instead of potential allies. Without equal political status, there is actually no “long term coexistence, mutual supervision” as Mao Zedong described in 1956.²¹ Non-Party sectors therefore can actually only serve consultative

¹⁹ Beatrice Leung, “China’s Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity,” *The China Quarterly* 176 (4) (2005): 894-913. 897.

²⁰ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 45.

²¹ Mao Zedong gave an important speech named “On the Ten Major Relationships” in 1956 at the extended conference of the Politburo, which included members of Politburo and provincial Secretaries. This speech outlined ten major relationships to be handled in socialist construction. Talking about the Party and non-Party relationship, Mao Zedong clearly disagreed with the single-party system in the Soviet Union. He questioned: “Is the single-party system better or the multi-party system better? According to current situation, I am afraid that the multi-party system should be better. It was valid in the past, and will be this way in the future. The relationship should be defined as long term coexistence, mutual supervision.” In the article “How the Guideline of Long Term Coexistence Made” at the website of *People’s Daily*, available

instead of supervisory function. The UFWD “has too often paid more attention to centralism, control and security, and not enough to democracy, voluntarism and freedom... This has often meant that the UFWD has been responsible for subverting the very unity it has tried to create.”²²

The SARA, as mentioned previously, is a state agency to fulfill administrative orders and policies issued by the State Council. The first governmental agency in charge of religious affairs was a Group on Research of Religious Issue set up under the Committee on Cultural and Educational Affairs in 1950, and was changed to Religious Affairs Division (RAD) the next year. In accordance to the new Constitution issued in 1954, as the Government Administrative Council of the Central People’s Government was renamed to the State Council, the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) of the State Council was established along with other nineteen government departments directly under the State Council. It was denounced in 1975, but was reestablished in 1979 after the Cultural Revolution. In 1998, the State Council decided to change the bureau’s name to the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA).

Since the functions of the SARA overlap with the UFWD, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between them. The SARA is an administrative department under the State Council, and its work is more specific than that of the UFWD. It is involved in religious affairs on a daily basis. Their work exclusively targets on religious groups and

from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64107/65708/65722/4444828.html>

²² Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 69.

individuals, sometimes coordinates between religious entities and government or collective bodies.²³ The UFWD, on the other hand, works on behalf of CCP, as a “representative” of CCP to contact with non-Party social sectors, including religious entities. Implicitly, the relationship between these two agencies also can be understood at an individual level. Since all Chinese Party members must belong to a certain party committee, and in the case of the SARA, the Party committee is under the discipline of the UFWD.²⁴ In this way, the SARA is actually at all levels subordinate to the UFWD that it relates to.

Important Religious Policies

As a matter of fact, no fundamental law specifying important religious issues, such as church-state relations and religious practices, is legislated in China yet. Although the Constitution prescribes to protect religious freedom of Chinese citizens, it is merely an empty frame with no feasibility. This situation makes the judicial powerless as to religion, but leaves a great space for the executive to control over religion. Meanwhile, the principle of legislation for religion in China is “regulations before laws, local level before national level,”²⁵ which indicates that informal regulations are issued before

²³ For example, the SARA is responsible for organizing Chinese Muslims’ pilgrimage to Mecca annually. A piece of recent news reported that the provincial SARA of Anhui Province is urging all religious clerical personnel to be enrolled in social security system, which is charged by the Administration of Social Insurance at all administrative levels, available from <http://www.sara.gov.cn/xwzx/dfgz/10083.htm>

²⁴ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking Common Ground*, 70.

²⁵ Peng Liu, “The Process of Legalization of Religion in China,” in Ze Jin and Yonghui Qiu (ed.) *Blue Book of Religion* (Social Sciences Academic Press (Beijing, China), 2010), 261-277: 262.

fundamental laws as a test, and these regulations are implemented at local level first before expanding to the whole country. It has been, however, over two decades since the legislation for religion was mentioned on the agenda of the CCP Central Committee. What have been achieved so far?

In the first Constitution issued in 1954, there is only one sentence mentioning religion: “Item 88: Citizens of the People’s Republic of China have religious freedom.”²⁶ This item is very obscure and general, and can be interpreted in different ways, and therefore is also difficult to be carried out. The 1978 Constitution maintained the item regarding religious freedom, but the 1982 Constitution clearly reflected the change of the government’s attitude toward religion, so did a series of documents and regulations issued since then, including Document No. 19 and No. 6. Obviously, CCP started realizing the impossibility of eradicating religion, and it would be a better way to contain it instead.

In the 1982 Constitution, Item 36 describes religious freedom more specifically:

1. Citizens of the PRC enjoy freedom of religious belief.
2. No organ of state, mass organization, or person is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not to believe in religion. It is impermissible to discriminate against any citizen who believes or does not believe in religion.
3. The state protects legitimate religious activities. No person is permitted to use religion to conduct counter-revolutionary activities or activities which disrupt social order, harm people’s health, or obstruct the education system of the country.
4. Religion is not subject to the control of foreign countries.²⁷

²⁶ Items of the 1954 Constitution are available from <http://www.ndcnc.gov.cn/datalib/2003/PolicyLaw/DL/DL-10943>

²⁷ Donald MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989),

Obviously, “religious freedom” here refers to “free to believe” only. Religious practice, propagation, even basic rights and obligations, etc., are not mentioned at all. It forms a large general obscure frame convenient for forthcoming interpretations, adjustments, specifications, and modifications.

The full name of Document 19 is “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period,”²⁸ which was issued by the CCP Central Committee in 1982, and soon became “the new guideline for the religious freedom policy in the reform era.”²⁹ This document reflected on the leftist mistakes on religious issues made during the Cultural Revolution, admitted the impossibility to eradicate religion during a short period of time and called for a united front with religious believers in the construction of a strong prosperous socialist China. However, this document also reaffirmed that CCP members could not change their atheist stand to join any religious organizations or practice any religion. To exchange for the permission to practice their religions, religious believers and organizations have to abide by a regulatory structure designed to limit religious group autonomy and the growth of members. This document restated the principle of anti-foreign influences and pointed out specific forms of “foreign influences.” Document 19 “prohibited grants of ‘feudal privileges’ to religious organizations and otherwise limited their capacity to recruit, proselytize and raise funds.

34-35.

²⁸ The complete Document 19 is available from http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no._19_1982.pdf

²⁹ Beatrice Leung, “China’s Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity,” 903.

Education of clergy and administration of religious organizations and buildings aimed to ensure that religious leaders remained loyal to principles of Party leadership, socialism, and national and ethnic unity.”³⁰ Although Document 19 was ambiguous and difficult to implement, it was a milestone in Chinese religious policy. It showed that in a new environment, both domestic and international, the best option for the Chinese government in handling religious issues was to recognize reality, adjust policies, and fit in.

During the 1980s, China experienced several important years of social liberalization and religious revival. The former was symbolized by three one-thousand-character posters that appeared on the “Democratic Wall” in Xidan, a central business area in Beijing; the latter incepted from a nationwide fever of practicing *Qigong*, which is a traditional Chinese martial art focusing on foster and control humans’ inner energy.³¹ Some characteristics of *Qigong*, especially among those healing sectarian groups, aroused the state’s concern of faith-based organizations. First of all, they were communal, generally with a leader who claimed to charismatically heal sectarians’ physical illness. Second, these groups were composed of people from different places with different backgrounds, and therefore formed a large social network full of social mobility.³² Both two characteristics made these healing groups ideological and social threat to the

³⁰ Pitman B. Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 317-337. 320.

³¹ Nancy N. Chen, *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), and her “Healing Sects and Anti-cult Campaigns,” *The China Quarterly* 174(2) (2003): 505–520.

³² Nancy N. Chen, “Healing Sects and Anti-cult Campaigns,” 505.

government. Significant social turmoil in Tibet and Xinjiang during 1988 to 1989, along with a national scale crisis brought by the 1989 democratic movement, posed particular challenge to CCP.³³

Internationally, communist parties in socialist countries in Eastern Europe successively lost their power, and Lithuania declared independence in 1990. Worries of repeating the same story haunted Chinese leaders. “In particular, the politico-religious activities of the Vatican and of the church-backed solidarity movement in Poland aroused fears of a similar mass movement taking hold among China’s working class, and suspicions that both the Catholic and Protestant churches in China could become bases for political subversion.”³⁴ As a proof of the reasonability of Chinese leaders’ worries, the collapse of Soviet Union created several independent nation-states, which stimulated the extreme nationalist emotions in Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Both ethnic and religious commonalities and emotions impelled ethnic minorities in these three regions to seek for more autonomy, ethnic self-determination, or even independence from the central government. “According to reliable reports, Uygur Muslims in Xinjiang and Mongols in Inner Mongolia have demonstrated openly in several cities following the failure of the August 1991 Soviet coup, calling for independence from Chinese rule.”³⁵

³³ Pitman B. Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” 320.

³⁴ Anthony P. B. Lambert, “Post-Tiananmen Chinese Communist Party Religious Policy,” 392.

³⁵ Ibid.

These immediate international crises forced CCP to emphasize being cautious to reactionary foreign forces in Document 6.

Document 6 was released in early 1991, with the title of “Circular on Some Problems Concerning the Further Improvement of Work on Religion.”³⁶ Document 6 was no new policy but a reaffirmation and supplementation of Document 19. Document 6 also emphasized increased regulatory control over all religious activities: “Implementing administration of religious affairs is aimed at bringing religious activities within the bounds of law, regulation, and policy, but not to interfere with normal religious activities or the internal affairs of religious organizations.”³⁷

It singled out the danger of “peaceful evolution” conducted by foreign reactionary forces through religious channel, and stressed it as a “political issue.” Document 6 directed public security organs to take forceful acts to contain those who use religious activities to “engage in disruptive activities,” “stir up trouble, endanger public safety, and weaken the unification of the country and national unity,” or “collude with hostile forces outside the country to endanger China's security.”³⁸ CCP believed that these provisions could effectively prevent potential social turbulence in Xinjiang and Tibet incited by religious reasons as well as reactionary intent by Christians from Taiwan. On the other hand, Document 6 also limited activities beneficial to religious proliferation and

³⁶ The complete content of Document 6 is available from http://zjj.nantong.gov.cn/art/2009/7/15/art_8342_242477.html

³⁷ Pitman B. Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” 320.

³⁸ Ibid., 321.

communications with oversea religious entities supporting Chinese religious organizations.³⁹

These two documents issued by the CCP Central Committee formed a concrete foundation for all administrative regulations and decrees issued thereafter. For instance, “Regulations for Religious Activities of Foreigners in China” and “Registration Procedures for Venues for Religious Activities”⁴⁰ are two decrees issued in 1994. Their titles clearly reflected CCP’s attempt to prevent foreign interference and reactionary activities in religious form. The infamous Order No.5, “The Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism,” exposed how desperate CCP was in front of political challenge posed by Dalai Lama.⁴¹

In practice, series of attacks on the “Shouters” in 1983, 1987 and 1995 faithfully revealed how worrisome the Chinese government was. The leaders surely realized how strong the spiritual motivation of religion could be, but they simply did not know or were not willing to take any actions to deal with it other than control and suppression. Facing fear, the first and most difficult step is to admit that fear exists.

Fortunately, CCP finally moved one step forward in the direction of religious toleration. In December 2001, the Politburo and State Council jointly convened a

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The latter has been replaced by “Examination and Registration Procedures for Venues for Religious Activities” issued in 2005.

⁴¹ These regulations are listed at the website of the SARA, available from <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zcfg/index.htm>

National Religious Work Meeting. General Secretariat of CCP back then, Jiang Zemin, made a remarkable speech on religious issue. He acknowledged that “religion could act as a stabilizing force in society and, as such, could be mobilized as a positive force for national development.”⁴² In September 2007, former Director of the SARA, Ye Xiaowen, gave a lecture with a title of “Religion: Conflict or Harmony” at a seminar for ethnic minority cadres of religious affairs in Henan Province. He pointed out that “it is important to clarify the direction of cultural development in constructing a harmonious society. To build up the core socialist value system, we should carry on traditional Chinese culture, dig for cultural resources beneficial to social harmony, and draw on successful experiences of other cultures. Religion could and also should make efforts and contribute to the construction of social harmony.”⁴³ In his article published, Ye also admitted the positive functions of religion in composing the root and core value of a civilization, which is the shield against “foreign cultural infiltration.”⁴⁴ Based on these evidences, it is very likely that CCP is attempting to incorporate religion into its framework of social harmony, since it can no longer act as an ostrich hiding from the reality that religion is too vibrant and dynamic to be controlled by mere suppression.

⁴² Beatrice Leung, “China’s Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity,” 910.

⁴³ According to news reported in 2008 by *Study Times*, which is the official newspaper published by the Party School of the Central Committee of CCP. Available from <http://hk.plm.org.cn/gnews/2008223/200822389455.html>

⁴⁴ Xiaowen Ye, *Zongjiao Wenti: Zenme Kan, Zenme Ban (Religious Problem: How to See and How to Do)*, 321-325.

Ideological Context

“In China, theory is not discussed apart from its application in practice, and there is no consideration of policy implementation apart from the question of theory.”⁴⁵ This is a part of Chinese culture, and investigating the Chinese history, CCP’s religious policy is nothing accidental given the ideological context of China. “Ideological context” used here mainly refers to two major facets embedded in Chinese culture and society: Confucianism and Marxism – Leninism.

Confucianism and Skepticism among Intellectuals and Rulers

Confucianism maintains an agnostic attitude toward supernatural beings, but admits the social function of religion as an effective tool for social mobility. One of the most famous agnostic quotes by Confucius is: “If you have not understood everything about life, how is it possible to know anything about death?”⁴⁶ At the same time, Confucius acknowledged that faith, religious or not, was very powerful in mobilizing the masses and stabilizing the sovereignty.⁴⁷ Ritual and correct method, so called *li*, on the other

⁴⁵ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking Common Ground*, 51.

⁴⁶ Confucius, “The Twelfth Conversation in Xianjin,” *Analects of Confucius*, in Juntian Liu, Song Lin, and Kekun Yu, *The Complete Interpretation of Four Books* (Guiyang, China: Guizhou People’s Press, 1988), 218-219. The complete conversation was between Confucius and his disciple named Zi Lu. Zi Lu asked Confucius how to serve ghosts and deities. Confucius answered: “How can you serve ghosts and deities before you can serve the alive well?” Zi Lu continued his question: “Then what is death?” Confucius answered: “If you have not understood everything about life, how is it possible to know anything about death?” (季路问事鬼神。子曰：“未能事人，焉能事鬼？”曰：“敢问死。”曰：“未知生，焉知死？”《论语·先进十二》)

⁴⁷ Confucius, “Yan Yuan,” *Analects of Confucius*, in Juntian Liu, Song Lin and Kekun Yu, *The Complete Interpretation of Four Books*, 231-232. The conversation was between Confucius and his disciple Zi Gong, who asked his teacher how to rule a state well. Confucius answered: “No more than enough food, strong military force, and the people’s faith.” Zi Gong continued to ask: “If one of these three must be removed, which one is dispensable?” Confucius answered: “Military force.” Zi Gong asked again: “Comparing the two items left, which one is dispensable?” Confucius answered: “Food. Everyone has to

hand, was necessary to maintain social stability, for ritual could teach the people to respect, while correct method would teach the people how to handle daily matters correctly, and therefore keep everything in order.

Throughout the dynastic Chinese history, there had never been any policies ever close to the separation of church and state as John Locke proposed. Instead, the traditional political thought that dominated China was “all lands under the sky are properties of king, and all people living on these lands are subjects of king” (普天之下，莫非王土；率土之滨，莫非王臣).⁴⁸ This statement succinctly concluded the fundamental principle in dynastic China especially after Confucianism was established as the monopoly in political and social thoughts. The emperor, as the intermediate between the Heaven and the earthly world and also the highest power and steward on earth mandated by the Heaven, had no intention to share his power with anyone else. As an old Chinese saying describes: “There is only one sun in the sky, and only one ruler on the earth” (天无二日，国无二君), the divine right of emperor was ultimate on earth, and therefore could not be challenged in any form from any source. Since the ruler had no intention to separate church and state, there would be no such separation in practice. All subjects, no matter what religious faith they would have, had to comply with the emperor’s orders, because they had only one identity – the emperor’s subjects.

die, but if the people lost their faith, everything will be lost.” (子贡问政。子曰：“足食，足兵，民信之矣。”子贡曰：“必不得已而去，于斯三者何先？”曰：“去兵。”子贡曰：“必不得已而去。于斯二者何先？”曰：“去食。自古皆有死，民无信不立。”《论语·颜渊》)

⁴⁸ Confucius (ed.), “Bei Shan” (North Mountain) in Xiao Ya, *The Classic of Poetry*.

It was well accepted that religion could be practiced among the masses, and could be used by the rulers to control the ruled, but it could not be sincerely incorporated into the ruling system, for irrational decision-making based on religious passion would lead the state to demise. Within the governing framework set according to Confucianism, religion has always been considered as an inferior form of ideology.

The other side of the coin is that Confucianism also provided a restriction on emperor: The divine power was “mandated” to emperor by the Heaven, and therefore, the Heaven could take it back if emperor on earth failed the Heaven. For example, a special form of mystic belief, heavenly told prophecy or omen “*Chen*,” played a significant role in Chinese dynastic change history, and still has impact on contemporary Chinese. It was a theoretical system based on the idea of the “interactions between Heaven and Mankind” proposed by Dong Zhongshu in Han Dynasty (202 B.C. – 220 A.D.). The core idea is that auspicious heaven honored the ruler; calamitous heaven condemned his thinking with all calamity caused by political errors.⁴⁹ *Chen* mystifies the Confucian thought that humans are connected and interact with the nature, trying to predict political trend through vague “prophecies” or omens. Most leaders of peasantry rebellions in Chinese history would take advantage of *Chen* as evidence to show the ordainment of the Heaven had been transferred from current emperors to them, and

⁴⁹ For more detailed information on “interaction between heaven and mankind” and general ideas of the role of Confucianism in politics throughout the history of dynastic China, please refer to Benjamin I. Shwartz, “Transcendence in Ancient China,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 104, No. 2: 57-68.

therefore to legitimize their rebellions and thrones acquired.⁵⁰ The White Lotus Rebellion in Qing Dynasty also served a good example of how powerful the spiritual force could be in mobilizing the people to overthrow the ruling class. Leaders of this secrete sect usually claimed them to be the reincarnation of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, and it was their destiny to overthrow the government.⁵¹

History taught Chinese rulers a wonderful lesson with catastrophic past: Religious and other spiritual movements always aim at political power. In other words, there is no pure religious movement without political agenda. The Chinese government thus has a serious post-trauma syndrome left from the past regarding religious impact on political movements, so the Chinese government tends to react nervously to social movements related to religion or with religious motivations. Embedded in the experience of putting out numerous religiously motivated rebels or large-scale social turmoil, the tradition of oppressing or at least containing and controlling religion continues today.⁵²

Due to the totalitarian tradition, the Chinese government, in both dynastic times and now, tends to rule instead of guide. The only orthodox thought is the one that the government wants the subjects to have, although it may tolerate or contain alternatives to

⁵⁰ Baoqun Luan, *Lishi shang de Yao yu Chen (Rumor and Prophecy in Chinese History)* (Beijing, China: Chinese Archive Press, 2006)

⁵¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 112-114.

⁵² Daniel H. Bays, "A Tradition of State Dominance," in Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Harmin (ed.), *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 25-39: 27.

exist to keep the balance and social stability. The government theoretically has the ultimate power in both political and ideological realms, and therefore has some characteristics of theocratic organization.⁵³ This statement is still valid as to contemporary Chinese government under CCP's leadership. The role of CCP in religious affairs will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

Marxism – Leninism and Chinese Practice

As discussed previously, the directive thought of Chinese religious policy making is scientific atheism, but militant atheism in implementation. The former originated from Marxism, while the latter derived from Leninism. However, CCP did not limit itself to the framework of Marxism-Leninism, but also developed the idea of “five characteristics of religion” as a supplementary guide with Chinese characteristics.

It is well known that the cornerstone of Marxism is materialism, and spiritual phenomenon is the superstructure and the reflection of material world. Religion, centered with a belief in supernatural beings, a distorted and false reflection of the reality. The most famous quote of Marx on religion is probably the paragraph from his early work “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,”

The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley (trans. and ed.), *Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1843) (University of Cambridge Press, 1970), 131

In this paragraph, Marx did not express any hostility against religion or intention to eradicate religion. Quite the opposite, he showed great sympathy to religious believers as “the oppressed creature,” and also considered religion a form of “protest against real suffering.” He did not agree with this passive way of struggle, and believed that religion appeased the oppressed and shifted the attention away from the struggle in the reality for social change. He continued to argue that “the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness... Thus, the critique of religion is the critique in embryo of the vale of tears of which religion is the halo.”⁵⁵ It was not an encouragement of eradication of religion by force in any sense, but instead an advice filled with good intention. The true happiness cannot be found in illusion, and therefore religion as a spiritual product cannot solve social problems in the real world.

The whole critique against religion is based on the formulation of Marxist alienation theory that religion is a product of man, while man is not a product of religion. He believed that religion as an illusion would vanish as this distorted world was corrected. History would “establish the truth for the world” after “the other-world of truth has vanished,” while philosophy should “unmask human self-alienation in its secular forms.”⁵⁶

The idea of Marxism on religion was developed later by Engels based on the understanding of social class and the European history since the 16th century. In a class

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 132.

society, religion could be used as a tool to perpetuate exploitation by the ruling class, and in this meaning, religion therefore would hinder social progress by obstructing fundamental social change. Engels articulated these ideas in his famous “The Peasant War in Germany,” which explored the experiences of revolution in 1848 and became a critical essay in Marxism. Engels pointed out that religion was not only an ideological issue discussed in this essay, but also an economic and social problem that the privilege class in monastery possessed a large quantity of land, and thus formed a strong economic force. He referred to religion as a cloak covering the substantive struggle between different social classes over economic and political interests. The Church was necessarily the first target in attacks against feudalism, since it was the highest authority in intellectual activities and powerful in political and economic activities.⁵⁷

Based on his social class analysis, Engels made a leap forward from “peaceful” justification of necessity of religion to “social battle” against the Church. He obviously was not satisfied with a passive attitude towards the Church given the specific social context and unavoidable conflicts with the Church for material interests, but he did not oppose religion in general as an ideology. Lenin made the next movement to “actively help the people to cast off the yoke of religion.”

Different from Engels, Lenin saw very little positivity in religion serving in progressive social movement. In his article in 1905, “Socialism and Religion,” Lenin

⁵⁷ Frederick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York, NY: International Publishers Co., Inc., 2006), 13–14 .

restated the substance of religion that Marx and Engels pointed out, and further clarified that religion was used as a tool facilitating the exploiters' control over the oppressed:

Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, over burdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation. Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters just as inevitably gives rise to the belief in a better life after death as impotence of the savage in his battle with nature gives rise to belief in gods, devils, miracles, and the like. Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labor of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven. Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.⁵⁸

In this article, Lenin showed understanding and sympathy of people's religious faith, and established the foundation for a social movement against religion, which was an appeasement for the people to accept oppression imposed on them. He did not advocate physical eradication of religious organization or so; he believed instead that the separation of church and state was necessary.

We demand that religion be held a private affair so far as the state is concerned. But by no means can we consider religion a private affair so far as our Party is concerned. Religion must be of no concern to the state, and religious societies must have no connection with governmental authority. Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever, i.e., to be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "Socialism and Religion" (1905), available from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/dec/03.htm>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Based on this recognition, Lenin pointed out the necessity to build up and consolidate the united front and to avoid weakening this coalition by overemphasizing the differences between opinions on religion.

Unity in this really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven. That is the reason why we do not and should not set forth our atheism in our Program; that is why we do not and should not prohibit proletarians who still retain vestiges of their old prejudices from associating themselves with our Party.⁶⁰

Instead of by coercing people to discard religion involuntarily, Lenin considered that the better way to clarify the myth of religion was by liberating people from real class oppression. He emphasized that the combat with religion should be conducted by continuous “preaching the scientific world-outlook.” In his article “The Attitude of the Worker’s Party to Religion,” published in 1909, he reconfirmed the attitude of the Party towards religion should be negative, but political coercion was not the most effective method to decrease and finally erase the influence and control of religion over the people.

A Marxist must be a materialist, i.e., an enemy of religion, but a dialectical materialist, i.e., one who treats the struggle against religion not in an abstract way, not on the basis of remote, purely theoretical, never varying preaching, but in a concrete way, on the basis of the class struggle which is going on *in practice* and is educating the masses more and better than anything else could.⁶¹

After the revolution, the necessity of anti-religious propaganda became much more necessary than before. Lenin urged restraint to carefully “avoid giving offence to the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion” (1909) available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/may/13.htm>

religious sentiments of believers, as it only leads to the strengthening of religious fanaticism.”⁶² However, he specified that natural scientists must be materialist with “correct” world view, for dialectic materialism composed the foundation of way of thinking in natural science. “In order to hold his own in this struggle and carry it to a victorious finish, the natural scientist must be a modern materialist, a conscious adherent of the materialism represented by Marx, i.e., he must be a dialectical materialist.”⁶³

It is evident that the contradiction between “building a unity with religious believers with respects and tolerance” and “real freedom instead of religious illusion” is embedded in Marxist theories from the very beginning. This contradiction reflects the tension in socialist countries’ religious policy and implementation, with no exception in China. On the other hand, it is also a conflict between the short-term view in constructing a socialist country and the long-term target in theoretical communist future.⁶⁴

Marxism-Leninism established a paradigm for the Chinese government in dealing with religious affairs. Within this framework, however, every generation of Chinese leaders has developed their own theories on religion ever since the establishment of PRC. Chinese leaders’ attitude is significant in understanding Chinese religious policies, because the five-thousand-year dynastic history forms the tradition of rule of man, which has not been changed much even after the establishment of PRC. Although each

⁶² Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 78.

⁶³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “On the Significance of Militant Materialism” (1922), available from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/12.htm>

⁶⁴ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 78.

generation of Chinese leaders has different emphasis on religious affairs, the kernel of stabilizing social environment and consolidating the rule of CCP has never changed.

Mao Zedong had his focus on establishing and consolidating the united front and the new born PRC, and therefore his speeches especially emphasized religious groups to be patriotic. For example, in his speech given on April 24, 1945, Mao addressed on religious freedom:

People's freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, thought, belief and body is the first freedom. The liberated areas of China permit the existence of different religions. The people's government protects religions, including Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism and other religions as long as the believers abide by the law. Believers and non-believers have their freedom without coercion and discrimination.⁶⁵

This speech explicitly supported religious freedom in general, and affirmed the equal status between religious and non-religious people. It sounded positive, but nevertheless had an embedded intention to consolidate the united front at the dawn of the victory over Japanese invaders. As the relationship with the US became more and more intense after 1949, Mao's emphasis shifted from religious tolerance and co-existence to patriotism of religious organizations. In speech given on August 30, 1949, Mao claimed:

Compared to other imperialist countries, the United States placed much more emphasis on spiritual invasion through on the work of religious, charitable, and cultural enterprises.... Americans like Dean Acheson know very well the hidden agenda behind the so-called religious, charitable and cultural ties which unite Chinese and Americans and deepen the friendship between the two

⁶⁵ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/mao-zedong-on-religious-freedom>

countries. Americans have run this kind of business with a deliberate plan for a hundred and five years since 1844. It is said their purpose is to deepen friendship.⁶⁶

Right before China intervened the Korean War, Mao gave another speech on July 19, 1950, reaffirmed the importance of patriotism among religious believers by commenting on the release of The Manifesto of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement⁶⁷:

The fundamental principles of the Chinese Christian Church and organizations in this proclamation [*The Manifesto of the Chinese Christian Three-self Patriotic Movement*] is to eliminate the influence of imperialism on churches in China; to be alert to the anti-revolutionary conspiracy and the fact that imperialism uses religion as a pretext; to cultivate patriotism and democratic awareness among Christian believers; and to set up a new type of church on the basis of self-administration, self-support and self-propagation.⁶⁸

This speech obviously had more political rather than religious intention given the international environment: The Korean War broke out, and China would soon engage in it. Patriotism was in urgent need. Mao endorsed the TSPM in the speech, but also encouraged Chinese Christians to declare an independence from foreign support. This speech was a milestone, marking the Three-Self principle became the foundation of Chinese Christian organizations “to eliminate the influence of imperialism on churches in China,” and the explicit attitude of the Chinese government to prevent “foreign

⁶⁶ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/mao-zedong-on-religion-and-international-affairs>

⁶⁷ The release of the Manifesto was also the initiation of Three-Self Patriotic Movement at the PRC era. More details about this movement will be addressed more in detail in chapter three.

⁶⁸ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/mao-zedong-on-fundamental-principles-of-the-chinese-christian-church>

penetration” or *heping yanbian* (和平演变, peaceful evolution, to overthrow CCP regime with peaceful method).

Deng Xiaoping took over the power at the end of the 1970s, and led China into the Reform and Opening era. Facing the pressure to adapt to the international community and to accommodate internationally acknowledged norms, China gradually opened its gate to the outside world, which nonetheless was filled with ideologies incompatible but competitive with communism. Deng Xiaoping repeatedly stressed CCP’s stand of preventing foreign penetration and Bourgeois liberalism. He promoted “religion’s adaption to socialism,” which was passed to following next generations of Chinese leaders as the paradigm in handling religious matters in reform era.

In his speech on August 26, 1980, he acknowledged the distinctiveness of religion but also warned: “An administrative order is not useful to religious matters. However, a fanatic approach to religion, which is against socialism and the interests of the people, has no place either.”⁶⁹ On December 12, 1981, he talked about the possibility of a normalization of China-Vatican relationship, and affirmed that “in the past, imperialist countries invaded China, using the Church as an important tool.” Two preconditions in this bilateral relationship are: Firstly, Vatican must solve the Taiwan issue and recognize one China, and secondly, Vatican must respect the Three-Self principle of the Chinese

⁶⁹ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/deng-xiaoping-on-approaches-to-religious-issues>

Catholic Association.⁷⁰ Deng Xiaoping obviously handled religious affairs with an embedded political agenda, especially in foreign relations. It was necessary given the new international environment that the Chinese government had to cope with. This policy stand was also valid during the administration of Jiang Zemin.

The core of the third generation of Chinese leaders, Jiang Zemin, showed two different types of attitude toward religion. After the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 and at the eve of the demise of the Soviet Union, Jiang Zemin gave an assuring speech on January 30, 1991 to guarantee religious freedom, and recognized the positive social function of religion.

The policy of religious freedom of the Communist Party of China will be implemented with stability and continuity. It will not be altered no matter what. Both the positive and negative experiences in the past forty years have proved that this policy is right and beneficial to unity among ethnic groups, stability of nation and society, and socialist development. In its absence, there would have been negative effects. The lessons of the Cultural Revolution are weighty and painful. We cannot afford to make such a mistake again. The Party and government should frequently educate their members and civil servants. Religious groups, for their part, also need to explain this policy frequently to their believers, so that we can all rest assured.⁷¹

After the Chinese government denounced the legal status of Falun Gong on July 22, 1999,⁷² Jiang Zemin started to appear more cautious about religious affairs. For

⁷⁰ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/deng-xiaoping-on-religion-and-international-affairs>

⁷¹ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/jiang-zemin-on-the-policy-of-religious-freedom>

⁷² Xinhua News Agency, "China Banned Falun Gong," *People's Daily*, July 22, 1999. Available from <http://english.people.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A101.html>

example, on December 4, 2000, he harshly criticized negative social function of religion in response to Dalai Lama's activeness in earlier time.

We maintain the principle that the churches in China are independent, against political and ideological infiltration from forces outside China with religion as a pretext, and against religious extremism. We adhere to the principle of church-state separation, opposing religious interference in administrative, judicial and educational affairs. We are alert to prevent a resurgence of religious feudal privileges. We support patriotic religious groups in their efforts to improve themselves, nurture future leaders, and assume responsibility. We believe that the Communist Party of China and religious groups can form political solidarity based on mutual respect, and that religious people can make contributions to the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

One year later, on December 10, 2001, Jiang Zemin reconfirmed the demand for religious believers to be "patriotic" by making several more specific requirements, and explicitly asked the religious groups to "adapt well to a socialist society."

Trying to adapt religion to a socialist society does not involve a demand that religious professionals and believers give up their faith. But it does demand of them to love for the country, support for the socialist system, and abide by laws and regulations. It requires that they engage in religious practices in accordance with and in service to the highest interests of the state and the overall interests of the nation; that they interpret religious doctrines for social development; that they, working together with all ethnic groups, oppose illegal activities using religion as a tool to jeopardize interests of our socialist motherland; and that they contribute to cohesion among ethnic groups, social development and national reunification. We encourage and support religious groups to keep their good traditions of being loyal to the country and their religions, making joint efforts for development, and serving the society. We hope that religious groups can adapt well to a socialist society.⁷³

As mentioned earlier, current President Hu Jintao adopted the principle of "religion's adaption to socialist society" established and developed by Deng Xiaoping

⁷³ Available from <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/quotes/jiang-zemin-on-adapting-religion-to-socialism>

and Jiang Zemin, and modified it in a more benign tone. His speech given at the 17th National Congress of CCP recognized the positive social function of religion in constructing a harmonious socialist China. More specifically, he required:

First, we adhere to the fundamental principles of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on religious affairs.... implement the policy of religious freedom, administer religious affairs under the law, but respect their independence and self-governance. We actively guide religious groups to adapt to our socialist society.... Second, we work on religious people.... We encourage them to support the leadership of the CPC and the socialist system, promote national unity and social harmony. We take care of them, especially those who have difficulties in life. We help them overcome adversity, organize and support them to advance productive activities, improve their quality of life and achieve prosperity through hard work. These efforts will make religious people become more aware of the care and concern of the CPC and the government. Third, we need to strengthen professional training and education to cultivate a team of qualified clerics who are politically reliable, theologically erudite, and socially well-respected among believers. We encourage patriotic religious groups to play an active role. We help them strengthen their capacity of self-support according to laws and regulations, respect the will of believers, and protect the rights and interests of religious groups.

Tradition is important to Chinese people throughout Chinese history; so is it in politics. The guideline in religious administration raised by previous leaders can be modified but not overturned. From Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, the long-term goal of CCP to realize communist future has never been abolished explicitly, but the tendency of further incorporation of religion to socialist construction is becoming more apparent. It is an inevitable consequence as the Chinese economic and political reform continues to meet the requirements of globalizing economy and developing Chinese society.

According to the leaders' blueprint of religious administration, the Chinese government took a practical approach to combine Marxism – Leninism with specific Chinese situation in policy implementation, and established the framework of the “five characteristics of religion.” This framework was introduced by the first director of the UFWD, Li Weihai, in the 1950s,⁷⁴ as an attempt to solve the contradiction between theoretical communist future and immediate Chinese practice.

The “five characteristics of religion” in China includes: 1) Complex; 2) mass-based; 3) long-lasting in character; with both 4) national-ethnic and 5) international implications.⁷⁵ The framework of “five characteristics of religion” was developed based on everyday administrative work dealing with religious affairs in China, and still is the working hypothesis in Chinese religious affairs. This framework focuses on the function and implication of religion in Chinese society instead of conceptual or theoretical discussion of religion's nature. It is a practical approach to handle religious affairs in contemporary China with recognition of the fact that religion is a historical issue and will exist for a long period time. The idea of “five characteristics of religion” leaves a possibility in both academic research and administration of religion in China other than pure Marxist – Leninist theoretical approach, and is an attempt to prevent leftist radical eradication of religion.

⁷⁴ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 83.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

This practical approach sounds inconsistent with the Chinese government's image as a totalitarian suppressor of religion, and this inconsistency accurately reflects a big problem in Chinese religious policy and implementation: China is a country ruled by man instead of law. To what degree a policy can be implemented highly depends on the leader in power and local cadre. Moreover, the "five characteristics of religion" is only a vague framework rather than specific policy, and can be used either positively or negatively in practice.

Implications on Religious Market

In a simple version, CCP is both the ruling political party of China and an ideological entity competing with other fast emerging similar groups, including religious ones. This double identity leads to a paradox embedded in its policy making and implementation: As the "manager" of religious market in China, keeping a balance of power between different players would benefit the stability of the market and of the whole society, so *laissez faire* on religion is more desirable; as a "player" advocating atheism on market *per se*, however, its animosity against other competitors determines that keeping monopoly in ideology would maximize its interests, and it is very convenient using its "manager" identity to carry out *laicite* nationwide as the basic religious policy stand. Since the 1980s, the second tendency started to decline due to both domestic and international factors, and this change consequently reinforced the former.

Organizationally, CCP has similar characteristics compared with religious groups. Social psychologist McFarland argued that similar to any other religious tradition, communism can also function socially and psychologically as a religion. He sought for an appropriate interpretation of communism as religion by three substantive properties of religion: Religion-as-means, religion-as-end, and religion-as-quest. Based on these three categories, he further divided religious believers into three types:

Adherents of any organized belief system seem likely to include those who are motivated by deep loyalty to the central teachings of the faith (i.e., intrinsic followers), those who accept the belief system or participate in its organizational functions for social and personal gains (i.e., extrinsic adherents), and those for whom the belief system is a product of authentic, open-minded truth seeking (i.e., quest followers).⁷⁶

In the article, McFarland confirmed a striking parallel between Christianity and Communism, and communist party members could be also divided into three types. Similarly, CCP can be divided to three sub-groups composed of intrinsic followers, extrinsic adherents, and quest followers. The leaders of CCP are, or pretend to be, the first group as intrinsic followers, so they have to insist on communism or any type of its variations – Marxism, Maoism, and socialism with Chinese characteristics, etc. In fact, they also belong to the second group, and personal interests obtained directly from their positions strongly urge them to maintain the status quo. Most lay members of CCP, especially those who joined after the Reform and Opening, belong to the second group as extrinsic followers, for they see possibilities to gain more personal interests as a Party

⁷⁶ Sam McFarland, “Communism as Religion,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 8 (1) (1998): 33–48. 34.

member or encounter more obstacles in daily life without this identity. Remaining small percentage of party members falls into the third category as quest followers.

Ideology wise, CCP has to compete with other ideological groups, including religious ones. Since the ideological superiority is partially the source of its legitimacy as the ruling party to maintain an authoritarian regime, it is necessary for CCP to keep its status as an ideological monopoly. “Ideology justifies the Party’s policies and motivates and guides party members in implementation; organization enables the Party to unite its members, mobilize the masses, extract resources and outmaneuver its opponents.”⁷⁷

According to the supply-side theory, the level of competition between “spiritual goods suppliers” in the marketplace directly affects the vitality of religious market. A marketplace with a monopoly has very low vitality, for the monopoly never willingly gives up interests gained. For this reason, the monopoly will employ any possible means to lower competitiveness. The most typical example would be the Orthodox Church in Russia. On the contrary, however, a market full of various competitors would stay at high vitality, for all competitors must improve themselves by some means to attract new members while maintain old members. The representative of this category is the United States.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ H. H. Lai, “Religious Policies in Post-Totalitarian China: Maintaining Political Monopoly over a Reviving Society,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2006): 55-77: 57.

⁷⁸ Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (3) (1994): 230 – 252. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000)

The monopoly of communism in China not only reduced the supply of alternative ideologies, but also suppressed the demand for spiritual goods in general. Yang interpreted this phenomenon in his recent work with a shortage economy approach quite successfully, and explained that the overwhelming increase of Chinese religious believers since the 1980s was the consequence of the decrease of monopoly and the availability of alternative ideologies.⁷⁹

The Reform and Opening undoubtedly improved the material conditions of Chinese people's life, but it brought new problematic issues to the Chinese society. Incidents such as the demise of the Soviet Bloc and domestic crisis, e.g. corruption and unemployment (下岗), gradually made the communist ideal much less reliable and trustworthy to Chinese people, and consequently a vacuum in spiritual realm emerged. At the same time, the gradual expansion of modernization and globalization introduced an abundance of ideological alternatives to China. As competitors poured into China, domestic spiritual needs awakened. The need for the Chinese government to participate in the international community on political, economic, and social affairs also required CCP to adjust its policies to be compatible with international norms. More possibilities are now available for competitors of communism in public arena. The next chapter will illustrate the situation of Protestantism in contemporary Chinese society.

⁷⁹ Fenggang Yang, "Religion in China under Communism: A Shortage Economy Explanation," : 3-33.

Summary

The Chinese government has a tradition of strict regulation towards religious issues throughout the history. This tradition has been continuously interacting with the unstoppable spiritual pursuit of common people, and shaped a unique religious marketplace in China.

This chapter introduced some background information to understand Chinese religious policies better, including a brief history of Chinese religious situation after 1949, an introduction of two major governmental agencies responsible for religious affairs, two most important religious documents issued by the Central Committee of CCP, the ideological context shaping these religious policies, and finally implications of them. The importance of this chapter is to understand the formation of a strictly regulated religious market in China, and its internal logic as an inevitable consequence of intertwined environmental factors. As a major source of legitimacy, communism and atheism as a package has been the orthodox ideology advocated and promoted wholeheartedly by CCP. CCP has been acting as both player and referee on religious market, competing with other ideologies for dominance. Using its political power and official communication institutions, CCP enjoyed monopoly for several decades. As the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the inception of the Reform era, its monopolistic status is facing serious challenges from various sources, including Protestantism. CCP now has to find itself a balance point in a dilemma: How to maintain its status as the ruling party

with ideological legitimacy while effectively includes ideological competitors into its framework of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

State regulation is an indispensable factor in explaining the prosperity of Chinese Protestantism, because it makes the religious market completely different from that in America or any other state where the principle of separation of church and state is widely acknowledged. Given this special circumstance, Chinese Protestantism hitherto has developed some unique organizational characteristics to meet special spiritual needs of the Chinese people.

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman analyzed the characteristics of American local congregations, and pointed out “American religion has thrived not because it has freed each individual to pursue his or her own spiritual quest or because uniquely viable theological ideas have taken root here, but because American laws and society have created a space for voluntary religious communities.”⁸⁰ This assertion is inspiring in the situation of China from another perspective. There is no mature civil society in China and therefore no space for voluntary religious communities. It sounds desperate, but religious communities cut a space out of the rigid social structure instead of growing in a space premade for them. This is also a potential opportunity for civil society to grow and expand in China.

⁸⁰ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

The next chapter will elaborate on the split between Three-Self Church and House Church in China after the establishment of PRC, and analyze the appeals of Protestantism to Chinese people under the conditions of modernization.

CHAPTER THREE

A Survey of Protestantism in China

Chinese Protestantism has been experiencing an unprecedented resurgence since the 1980s, and there is no evidence yet that this growth will slow down in the near future. With no differentiation between denominations, Chinese Protestantism appears easy to understand organizationally and theologically. The real problem is that given the social and political context of China, Chinese Protestantism is complex in several ways dissimilar to Protestantism in Western societies, such as the inaccuracy of its large population, the tension between church and state, the internal division due to legal reasons, and the vagueness of its future development.

Numbers matter. It is evident that the influence of a small religious group with only fifty thousand members is dramatically different from that of a large group with over fifty million members. The accurate number of Chinese Protestants, however, still remains unknown. There are estimations with a vast range of numbers.

For example, in the *Handbook on Religious Liberty around the World: China*, Rutherford Institute estimated the number of Chinese Protestants as:

One government publication on religion estimates that China has over 6,000 Protestant churches and 4.5 million Protestants... Another source cites the Communist leadership as estimating that China has over 8 million Christians who worship in over 8,000 churches and 25,000 home gatherings. In contrast, one reputable Christian missionary publication estimates that there are 58 million Protestants and 8.7 million Catholics in China. Using the limited

statistical data available at the provincial and local level, a more recent survey commissioned by *News Network International* determined that there may be no more than 30 million Protestant Christians in China, which falls short of estimates by ministries working in China which have at times reached as high as 100 million.¹

At the 2008 Summit for Chinese Spirituality and Society at Peking University, Prof. Yu Jianrong from the Institute of Rural Development at Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) estimated that the accurate number of Chinese Protestants may be between 60 to 70 million. He has been working with Chinese Protestant groups for over decades, and his estimation was based on his personal fieldwork experiences. His close connection with House Church in rural areas provided an insight unavailable to government.

In 2010, for the third continuous year, the CASS published the *Blue Book of Religions*, its annual report on religion in China. One of its articles reported the recent survey conducted by CASS. The survey period was 2008 to 2009, covered 31 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions in mainland China, and had a sample size of 63,680. According to the survey, the current population of Chinese Protestants is about 23.05 million, including those who have been baptized (67.5%) and those who have not yet been baptized (32.5%).²

¹ Pedro C. Moreno (ed.), *Handbook on Religious Liberty Around the World* (Charlottesville, VA: Rutherford Institute, 1996), available from <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/rihand/China.html>

² Research Group from the Institute of World Religions (CASS), "An In-House Questionnaire Survey on Christianity in China," in Ze Jin, Yonghui Qiu (ed.), *Blue Book of Religions* (Beijing, China: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2010), 191.

Major reasons for these wide variations of numbers are: Most of the Church growth in the last two decades has been in the countryside, where it is difficult to count any group with accuracy; and a large portion of Protestant believers are members of House Church, which is an illegal religious organization and its members are too cautious to identify themselves.³ Moreover, one characteristic of traditional Chinese religious tradition is diffusion, which contrasts Chinese religious tradition to the institutionalized Western religious tradition. This characteristic makes religion a very loose-in-organization but penetrating-in-influence factor in people's daily life. Believers do not attach to a certain religious organization, such as a temple or a church; neither do they attend religious services regularly as a necessity.⁴ This characteristic is also valid for Chinese Protestants. Given the limit availability of Protestant churches, almost all churches are overwhelmed with worshippers on Sundays, but there is no membership system to connect believers and the church. "No other available options in this area" is often the reason why believers stick to one church. The fluidity of Chinese Protestants consequently forms another obstacle to make an accurate estimation of their population.

This chapter reviews the split between Three-Self Church and House Church, points out two emerging Protestant groups in contemporary China, and analyzes the appeals of

³ Daniel H. Bays, "Chinese Protestant Christianity Today," *The China Quarterly* 174(2) (2003): 488-504: 491.

⁴ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1960).

Protestantism to the Chinese people. The split within Chinese Protestants reveals the tension embedded in church-state relations in China, for the split is indeed a reaction against the involvement of state power in religious affairs. This history also demonstrates a development trajectory of Protestantism with Chinese characteristics. The second part of this chapter will analyze the appeals of Protestantism from perspectives of demand side, supply side, and larger social context, showing how these factors interact with each other to contribute to the prosperity of Protestantism in China.

One Lord, Two Churches

Three-self Movements in Early Days of Chinese Protestantism

It is well known that the establishment of the TSPM divided Chinese Protestants into two fractures: Three-Self Church and House Church. Its origin, however, is little studied. The “three-self” principles promoted in the TSPM – self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation – were actually the legacy of a patriotic movement started in the 1920s. The TSPM’s early activists initially emerged from Protestant institutions with strong ties to the West, most notably the Chinese Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), the Episcopal Church in China, St. Johns University in Shanghai, and the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.⁵ It began its close connection with the communist government in the 1950s, leading to a dramatic reduction of Protestants associated with Three-Self Church.

⁵ Yihua Xu, “ ‘Patriotic’ Protestants: The Making of an Official Church,” in Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (ed.), *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 107.

Starting from the early days of Protestant missionaries in China until the TSPM's establishment in 1950, there were continuous efforts to make churches in China more independent, more acceptable to Chinese people, and more adaptable to Chinese society. Main forces in these efforts included three groups: Independent churches, indigenous broad-based movements, and mainstream denominations.⁶

The first group was composed of churches that officially separated from the denominational churches and institutions which were established and supported by Western missionary societies. These churches emerged among Chinese Protestants, and therefore were financially independent and managed by Chinese Protestants. The establishment of independent churches was a reaction against the institutional and hierarchical character of the mission-founded churches, and sought to purify the church of its worldly entanglements.⁷ These independent churches were also the forerunners of conservative evangelical Protestants, who resisted the TSPM's hegemony in Protestantism after 1950, and subsequently formed an important part of House Church.⁸

The indigenous movements without missionary assistance or institutional background also emerged in the early twentieth century. Churches in this category were generally founded by charismatic and often authoritarian Chinese Christian leaders.

⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁷ Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing," in Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (ed.), *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2001), 199.

⁸ Yihua Xu, " 'Patriotic' Protestants: The Making of an Official Church," 108-109.

They represented a more radical break with the Western tradition and integrated more deeply with Chinese customs. This group later was under attack of the TSPM, and most churches were forced to merge with the TSPM. Several groups such as the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock managed to relocate their headquarters overseas.⁹

Except the Baptist churches and the China Inland Mission, many mainstream denominations and mission societies advocated indigenization of Protestantism in China and formed the third group in indigenization efforts. These churches cooperated with the National Christian Council of China (NCC), the first and only all-Chinese national coordinating and bridging agency of Protestant churches in China before 1950, promoted an indigenization movement aimed at de-Westernizing Protestant doctrines and encouraging the integration of Protestantism and Chinese culture. There emerged a number of large union and ecumenical churches during this period due to the same indigenization efforts. In these churches, finances were an enduring source of dependence on Western mission societies, and composed the major reason why this group of churches was not completely independent as the other two groups. These mainstream denominational churches, however, enhanced the social image and acceptability of Protestantism in Chinese society and fostered many capable Chinese Protestant leaders. The TSPM indeed recruited most of its early activists from this group of churches.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 109.

¹⁰ Ibid., 110-111.

The Split between Three-Self Church and House Church

The establishment of Three-Self Church. On July 28, 1950, forty Chinese Protestant leaders jointly signed a document entitled “Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China,” which became later widely known as the “Christian Manifesto.” On September 23, 1950, the *People’s Daily* – the official newspaper of CCP – published the manifesto on the front page, with a list of 1,525 signatories. At the conference of Chinese Protestant churches held in Beijing from July 22 to August 5, 1954, the National Committee of the TSPM was formally established, with Wu Yaozong as its first chairman.¹¹ The Korean War was the major reason for the delay of the formal establishment of the TSPM as a national organization.

In the “Christian Manifesto,” the TSPM leaders claimed that Chinese Protestant churches and organizations whole-heartedly supported the Common Program, would oppose imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism under the leadership of the Chinese government, and would contribute to the construction of independent, democratic, peaceful, united, and prosperous new China. It required churches around China to realize the sinful activities that imperialist countries had done to China and to recognize the reality that imperialist countries, especially the US, took advantage of Protestantism in the past and still had the intention to use Protestantism as a tool for their reactionary conspiracy. Therefore, Chinese Protestant churches and organizations that

¹¹ Ibid., 115. Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 127-133.

were relying on foreign financial and personnel aid should sever overseas ties as soon as possible and work toward self-reliance.¹²

On September 23, the *People's Daily* also published an editorial accompanied with the “Christian Manifesto.” The editorial defined the TSPM as a patriotic movement that Chinese Protestants should participate to cast off the influence of imperialist countries on Chinese Protestantism. “...The success of this movement will give Chinese Protestantism a new life, change Chinese people’s view of Protestantism. This movement draws a clear line between their own religious activities and imperialist invasive activities with no overlap.”¹³

The movement to gather signatures had a great influence upon Chinese Protestants. The endorsement of the NCC of the “Christian Manifesto” marked a significant turning point for this “all-Chinese gathering.” It helped to open the way for the TSPM and also encouraged Chinese Protestants in local congregations to sign the “Christian Manifesto.” According to the TSPM leaders, over 410,000 Chinese Protestants put their signatures to the “Christian Manifesto.” The “Christian Manifesto,” however, also raised questions for many Chinese Protestants about political loyalty, Christian faith and personal relationships with missionary friends. In fact, authors of the “Christian Manifesto”

¹² Wu, Yaozong (et al.). “Zhongguo Jidujiao zai Xin Zhongguo Jianshe zhong Nuli de Tujing” (The Christian Manifesto), *People's Daily*, September 23, 1950, available from http://www.gospeltimes.cn/news/2010_10_12/15137.htm.

¹³ Anonymous, “Sanzi Xuanyan de Chansheng” (The Birth of the Christian Manifesto), 2011. Available from <http://zgaxr.com/Item/367.aspx>.

intended to arouse this controversy and to solve it by putting the question of political accountability before the church, and the standpoint of the church before individuals.¹⁴

The “Christian Manifesto” was published right after the outbreak of the Korean War, so the political intention in this document was nothing surprising. The Korean War hastened the process of church independence. By the end of 1950 foreign missionaries started departing from China in large numbers and virtually completed the withdrawal by 1951.¹⁵

One of the TSPM’s chief goals was to “unify” the Protestant churches in China under the leadership of CCP. With strong support from the government, it first took over existing institutions under the NCC by “electing” Wu Yaozong, the first chairman of the TSPM, the vice chairman of the NCC and the moderator of the Church of Christ in China. Once established, the TSPM “systematically dismantled most Protestant institutions,” and this process was greatly accelerated by the government’s policy to cut off all overseas financial and personnel connections or aids for all Protestant churches and organizations.¹⁶ It directly led to an institutional reshuffle among Chinese Protestants. Old Protestant churches and organizations were greatly weakened, and basically lost the option to be independent outside the TSPM system. The TSPM successfully wiped out the influence of old churches and organizations nationwide, and

¹⁴ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 131.

¹⁵ Richard Bush, *Religion in Communist China* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 38-68.

¹⁶ Yihua Xu, “‘Patriotic’ Protestants: The Making of an Official Church,” 116-118.

therefore established the foundation for the “unification of worship” starting from 1958 to eradicate denominational differentiation.

In the spring of 1979, Chinese Protestants resumed religious practice after the suspension during the Cultural Revolution. In 1980, at the Third National Congress of Chinese Protestants, the CCC was established as an institutional expression of the TSPM. The CCC was envisioned as an organization “to serve the pastoral and ecclesiastical needs of Chinese worshipping communities,”¹⁷ and claimed its objective to be:

To unite all (Protestant) Christians who believe in one Heavenly Father and confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and abiding by the common Bible, with one mind and in cooperative efforts, seek to further the cause of a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating Church in our country.¹⁸

The *lianghui* (两会, two committees) system of Three-Self Church was hereby formally founded. In formal terms, Three-Self Church operates “on a constitutional basis, with a rational bureaucratic structure, regular meetings, and a leadership chosen through elections,” and membership in Three-Self Church is voluntary, covering the whole ethnographic spectrum, and self-supporting with little financial aid from government.¹⁹ As the Cultural Revolution ended and the Reform and Opening incepted, the social context of China changed dramatically, and the role of *lianghui* also changed. Chinese Protestant leaders started to relocate *lianghui* and Three-Self Church. Instead

¹⁷ Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 189.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ryan Dunch, “Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing,” 212.

of being a “transmission belt” disseminating party policies to church members and uniting them behind these policies, they now gradually realized the importance to assert and defend the autonomy to run the church based on their rights granted by Constitution and religious regulations.²⁰

The emergence of House Church. The emergence and expansion of House Church was indeed a reactive activity regarding the establishment of the TSPM as an officially endorsed church system. Therefore, the split between Three-Self Church and House Church was indeed the consequence of CCP’s political interference of Chinese Protestant internal affairs. Some Chinese Protestants and their organizations were strongly convinced against any collaboration with atheists and any intertwinement with political forces, such as the independent churches discussed previously. The situation was further complicated during the Cultural Revolution, when all organized religious activity ceased to function along with the patriotic associations. Many Protestants secretly continued their religious practices underground, mostly in an individual’s home, and these sectors became known as House Church Movement. House Church continued to be active even after the end of the Cultural Revolution. After experiencing a rapid growth since the 1980s, House Church hence became a contrast and counter with the TSPM and Three-Self Church.

²⁰ Ibid.

Nanjing-based Bishop K. H. Ting, who held the top position in both the TSPM and the CCC until his retirement in 1996, “understood the negative image of the TSPM because it was believed to be a department of the government, empowered to rule over the Protestant Church.”²¹ For example, in Guangdong Province, peoples ranging from governmental officials and ordinary civilians had only a very vague image of the TSPM and CCC, and even considered them as subordinate departments of government working on religious affairs.²²

The Protestant Church in China has a long tradition of lay leadership and has always had a shortage of trained professional staff relative to the number of believers. There are two major reasons for this consequence. On the one hand, foreign missionaries were reluctant to grant ordination to Chinese church workers; on the other hand, the Chinese independent churches tended to reject professional staff. Within the Chinese independent churches, all members were considered equal and the system of ordained paid clergy would break this equality. At the same time, ordination as a practice of the denominational churches that carried a foreign stigma was regarded a foreign influence, and non-ordained leaders were seen as more spiritual and independent. Therefore, lay leaders formed the majority of church workers, and this pattern became more pronounced in the 1980s.²³

²¹ Michael D. Suman, *The Church in China: One Lord, Two Systems* (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2006), 345.

²² Ibid.

²³ Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK:

This tradition, with a very strong color of patriotism and a unique understanding of biblical teachings, caused a serious problem within House Church: Most church workers serving House Church lack systematic and formal theological training, and usually interpret the Bible according to their own understandings without a theoretical foundation. Moreover, most members of House Church, especially those in rural areas, are less educated, and hardly able to read the Bible by themselves. They heavily rely on the clergy for answers to questions in theology and daily life. Most House Church leaders, at the same time, are charismatic figures, and have very strong influence on their followers. This behavior is an expression of the indigenization of Chinese Protestantism, and will be discussed in the next section.

With no appropriate direction in biblical teaching, cults are more likely to emerge, such as the Eastern Lightning in Henan Province. The teachings of this cult proclaimed a woman named Lightning Deng from Henan Province the second Christ, and her book, *Lightening from the Orient*, was the Word of God. “The book claimed the first coming of Christ was to redeem humanity, while the second is to conquer men's hearts and defeat Satan. Those who do not accept her words would die a terrible death or receive severe punishment.”²⁴

Cambridge University Press, 1993), 82.

²⁴ Lois Chan and Steve Bright, “Deceived by the Lightning,” *Christian Research Journal* vol. 28 No.3 (2005).

The TSPM officially did not admit the existence of House Church before the 1990s, but in an interview in 1989, Bishop K. H. Ting talked about reasons for the existence of House Church. He attributed this phenomenon to several “objective” reasons: The insufficiency and inaccessibility of Three-Self churches; the misunderstanding of Three-Self Church leaders as betrayal of the “real” Church; different opinions on doctrines and liturgy; and inappropriate behaviors of some pastors and leaders.²⁵

The sensitivity of House Church originated from its “illegal” status. Since the Chinese government requires all religious institutions and venues to be registered, the reluctance of the House Church to collaborate with government becomes the biggest obstacle on their way to be legalized. This is the very reason why most members of House Church tend to be very cautious and hesitant to identify themselves. However, not all House churches today remain secret gathering, but some in urban areas has started functioning overtly.

According to Prof. Yu Jianrong, there are three major types of House Church in contemporary China. One is traditional House Church, which remains secret, hierarchical, and closed to outsiders, and strongly resists the influence of Three-Self Church. The second type is open-ended House Church. This group tends to be transparent and public, and has less resistance against Three-Self Church, but still has no communication with it. The third type is the new urban House Church, which is usually

²⁵ Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, 85.

composed of better educated people with higher income, and practices Protestant faith publicly. Many churches in this group even seek for conversation with government for legalization.²⁶ The new trend of House Church is to become more public with increasing social elites as members. This change is dramatically shifting the power structure among Chinese Protestants.

The relationship between Three-Self Church and House Church is highly complex, and this tension will continue as long as CCP insists on its religious policy and requires for registration within the framework of the TSPM. Oppression only leads to backfire. Oversensitivity of government will lead House Church to go deeper underground, and government will be more likely to lose control over it. As Yang described in his article, the boundaries between these two Churches are not clear cut, but are constantly shifting.²⁷ The insufficiency and inaccessibility of Three-Self Church would lead to the expansion of House Church; the illegalized status of House Church would seek for a more secure way to practice religious faith. The emergence of new urban House Church reveals a possible future of rapprochement between House Church and government and points out a leeway for House Church to acquire a quasi-legal status.

²⁶ Jianrong Yu, "Desensitization of Chinese House Church," based on his presentation at the Summit for Chinese Spirituality and Society, Beijing, October 8–11, 2008, available from http://www.d8b.org/article/shige1111/2916_3.html

²⁷ Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93-122. 115.

Two Emerging Believer Groups

Two groups of Protestants are currently emerging as new components of Chinese Protestants: entrepreneurs and intellectual elites. The first group mainly inhabits some of economically developed coastal areas, and includes private business owners and middle-level and above employees.²⁸ The second group is represented by college students, professors, and other similar intellectual groups in urban areas. These two groups greatly modified the old membership composition of Chinese Protestantism which was mainly mentioned as three majorities: old, female, and illiterate.²⁹

Believers belonging to the first group can be divided into two sub-groups based on their conversion time: One group is composed of believers who converted to Protestantism before they became business owners, and believers of the other group converted to Protestantism because they found Protestant doctrines are compatible with their business spirit. No matter which group they belong to, these entrepreneur Protestants share some common characteristics: wealthy, better-educated, open-minded, and active in church activities.³⁰ Financially, they are the major resource of funding to

²⁸ Cunfu Chen, *Zhuanxing Qi de Zhongguo Jidujiao: Zhejiang Jidujiao Ge'an Yanjiu (Christianity in a transitional China: A Case Study of Christianity in Zhejiang Province)* (Beijing, China: Dongfang Press, 2005), 73-103.

²⁹ Shining Gao, "The Faith of Chinese Urban Christians: A Case Study of Beijing," in Miikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang (ed.), *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 261.

³⁰ Cunfu Chen, *Zhuanxing Qi de Zhongguo Jidujiao: Zhejiang Jidujiao Ge'an Yanjiu (Christianity in a transitional China: A Case Study of Christianity in Zhejiang Province)*, 93-98. Xiaofeng Tang, "Yi Sange Tezheng Kan Dangjin Zhongguo Jiaohui" (A Study on Contemporary Chinese Protestant Churches from Three Perspectives), in Zhiwei Xu (ed.) *Jidujiao Sixiang Pinglun (Recent Review of Christian Thoughts)*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2009), 120 – 135.

establish church buildings and to carry out regular church activities. Socially, they are powerful connection between churches and other social organizations and government agencies, and activists in expanding influence of Protestantism. Many of them incorporate Protestant doctrines into their business cultures, and encourage their employees to convert. Organizationally, they are advocates of democratic management of churches. Entrepreneur Protestants are more likely to be elected as deacons of a church because of their social influence. They therefore form another authority within the church other than the clergy. With their power as leaders, they generally tend to promote democratic management on most church affairs.³¹

The most typical Chinese Protestants in the second group are college students. A fellowship based at Renmin University in Beijing holds over eight hundred regular members, who are all professors and students from universities nearby.³² Protestantism has thrived on college campuses across China and formed a so-called “Protestant fever.” Many researches so far has provided convincing data on college student Protestants, showing that the ratio of Protestants among college students is apparently higher than among the general population.³³ The main reason leading to this fever can be attributed

³¹ Ibid.

³² Interview with Prof. Cheng, who was also a presbyter of the fellowship, on Oct. 8, 2008 in Beijing, China.

³³ Xiaofeng Tang, “Yi Sange Tezheng Kan Dangjin Zhongguo Jiaohui” (A Study on Contemporary Chinese Protestant Churches from Three Perspectives), in Zhiwei Xu (ed.) *Jidujiao Sixiang Pinglun (Recent Review of Christian Thoughts)*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2009), 120 – 135. Peng Zuo, “Xiangyata Zhong de Jidutu – Beijingshi Daxuesheng Jidu Xinyang Zhuangkuang Diaocha” (Protestants in Ivory Tower: A Survey on Protestantism among College Students in Beijing), *Youth Studies*, Vol 4, 2005, 15-23.

to the influence of friends and family, and also the special environment of university campus, where more books and lectures on Protestantism are available and accessible. At the same time, the curiosity towards Western cultures among college students, or even simply interests in improving English proficiency leads college students to Protestantism through books or foreign teachers.

Protestantism's Appeal to Contemporary Chinese People

What draws people to Protestant churches? The answers to this question can be categorized into theological and social ones. The theological category will be omitted here, and greater attention will be paid to Protestantism as a social institution composed of members with various background and ethnographic characteristics.

Demand Side – The Increase of Spiritual Need in China since the 1980s

Religion by nature is nothing alien to man, but instead an inherent psychological need embedded in human organism. As Peter Berger once pointed out, "...unlike the other mammals, this world is not simply given, prefabricated for him. Man must *make* a world for himself. The condition of the human organism in the world is thus characterized by a built-in instability."³⁴ In this condition, man needs a transcendent order to stabilize his relationship with himself and the external world.

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred is meant here a

³⁴ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* [New York, NY: Anchor Books (A Division of Random House, Inc.)], 5.

quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience.³⁵

To highlight several important psychological changes of Chinese people through the past decades, it is necessary to reemphasize several major historical points mentioned before. CCP greatly suppressed people's spiritual demands by carrying out large-scale life-time atheist propagation since 1949. This atheist movement reached the peak during the Cultural Revolution, when almost all religious activities were banned and religious institutions were shut down. As the Cultural Revolution ended, the Chinese society experienced a great spiritual awakening in the 1980s initiated by the practice of *Qigong*. This spiritual awakening was interrupted by tightened religious policies issued after the Tiananmen Incident, but Chinese people again started to pay more attention to their intrinsic spiritual needs. The Reform and Opening initiated the expansion of *de facto* capitalism in China. The change happening in material world also modifies people's mind. Many ideas advocated by Confucius or CCP are largely discarded, such as selfless devotion and collectivism.

In the epoch-making wave, commercialism rises as a byproduct of economic development in China. Commercialism, in its original meaning, is the practices, methods, aims, and spirit of commerce or business. Today, however, it primarily refers to the tendency within corporatism to turn everything into objects, images, and services sold for the purpose of generating profit. There is also a tendency for intangible things

³⁵ Ibid., 25.

such as happiness, beauty, or health to be given a monetary value or to be spoken of as commodities.³⁶

Commercialism affects contemporary Chinese people's spiritual needs in three ways. First, commercialism urges the majority of the society to pursue the maximization of material individual profit, which characterizes a typical capitalist society described by philosopher Erich Fromm.³⁷ However, the internal instability cannot be erased by material abundance. Spiritual security and assurance is always in need. Furthermore, the advancement of material well-being forms a contrast to the impoverishment in spiritual realm.

In contemporary China, rapid economic development improved people's standard of living, but many new social problems have also emerged: Rich-poor polarization, corruption, indifferent social relations, and so on. Chinese traditional values, action principles and faith systems have been greatly challenged. The Chinese people began to realize that utilitarianism embedded in Chinese culture leads people to judge everything according to its contribution to success in "this world," and the evil of human nature becomes more obvious in front of material temptation. The society is losing its principle; while against this background, it is more obvious that without faith being a

³⁶ Commercialism is closely related with the rise consumerism, which is defined as "the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in society." For more information, please refer to Gary S. Cross, *An All-consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000).

³⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1956), 77-98.

solid foundation, no morality can be really meaningful.³⁸ Commercialism hereby stimulates people's concern of spiritual pursuit by revealing stingy existential anxieties and tensions in everyday life.

Second, commercialism also promotes people's reliance on spiritual power for psychological comfort. Religious congregation becomes a place where believers resort for psychological healing, while religious faith also turns to a psychological weapon for fighting in the real world for material goods.³⁹ One typical case is prosperity gospel, which claims that God will bless His followers with material wealth. In China, the best example is the God of Fortune worshipped in almost every store and restaurant. Most store owners may not identify themselves as "religious," and more frequently, they argue the veneration is only a Chinese customs instead of personal faith. "It is always beneficial to seek for more gods' blessings."⁴⁰ They behave, however, certainly like devout believers: Regular incense burning, dedication of fresh fruits and flowers, and praying daily.

³⁸ Pingye Li, "How Do Social and Psychological Needs Impact the Existence and Growth of Christianity in Modern China?" in Miikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang (ed.), *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 219.

³⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 77-98.

⁴⁰ I interviewed many store and restaurant owners from October 2008 to February 2009, ranging from mega-cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, to small towns such as Wuding in Yunnan Province. Most of them claimed no religious beliefs, especially in large cities. In certain areas, such as Shangri-La in Yunnan Province, the situation is different. Shangri-La is a famous tourist attraction located in an autonomous region of Tibetan. The majority residents there are Tibetan Buddhism, and this area is widely recognized as a Holy Land of Tibetan Buddhism. Most stores in this area therefore are decorated in Tibetan Buddhist style to attract tourists, and store owners also publicly identify themselves as Tibetan Buddhists.

Third, commercialism invaded the spiritual realm with a ticketing system. In China, religious sites are often historic cultural relics as well, especially as to Buddhist temples. These sites are protected by either local or central government and charge for tourist visit. This system certainly benefits tourism and creates significant revenue for governments, but it also prevents local believers from practicing normal and regular religious activities. A popular solution is that believers prefer to build smaller religious sites by private fund-raising, especially in rural areas. As a contrast, churches are exempted from ticketing system and open to believers for free. Additionally, Protestantism costs little as a way to seek for protection, redemption, and blessings, and therefore is appealing to many believers in poverty. Chinese common people who have no strict organizational bondage but somewhat religious beliefs become potential converters to Protestantism, because “their tendency towards theism becomes a resource in converting to higher religions.”⁴¹

Moreover, the expansion of individualization along with modernization is another reason leading to the growth of people’s spiritual need. One side of individualism may imply independence; the other side of individualism, however, means isolation. Individualism has its root in the Reformation, which broke the authority of the Church as the single path leading to redemption and salvation and handed individuals the power to interpret scripture and build up a personal relationship with God. Modernization pushed

⁴¹ Pingye Li, “How Do Social and Psychological Needs Impact the Existence and Growth of Christianity in Modern China?” 216.

it further by pluralizing and relativizing ideologies.⁴² With little overlapped in life, modern humans frequently find themselves in solitude and socially isolated. As Jean-Paul Sartre said, humans are “condemned to be free,”⁴³ because the collapse of the ultimate authority of deity on morality, truth and meaning, etc. casted humans into the wilderness with no boundaries or rules, and the necessary consequence is nihilism. To fight with nihilism, a spiritual pillar and a congregation becomes necessary for every human being searching for certainty in an uncertain society.

Supply Side – Protestantism as a Transcendent Religion

As discussed in chapter two, the ideological context in China is explicitly dominated by the legacy of Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism with some implicit influence of folk religions. A shared characteristic of these ideologies is a strong concern of “this-world,” leaving little, if any, space for the-other-world.

As mentioned previously, sociologist C. K. Yang presented in *Religion in Chinese Society* that China is not a secular society; on the contrary, it is very religious, in a different form. Religion exists in Chinese society in a diffused form with no fixed membership or regular church services, but it penetrates people’s everyday life with strong influence on every aspect, such as wedding and funeral.⁴⁴ However, it is true that

⁴² Peter L. Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009)

⁴³ Sartre extensively argued for this statement in his famous book *Existentialism and Humanism*.

⁴⁴ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*.

religion in China primarily focused on worldly affairs instead of salvation in the-other-world. For example, in Chinese Buddhism, Guanyin is the Bodhisattva associated with compassion as venerated in Chinese Buddhism, and usually appears as a gentle female in pictures or sculptures after Tang Dynasty. Her name well reflects her role as a Bodhisattva – “She who perceives the world’s lamentations.” She cares about this world with great compassion, saves troubled people immediately, and hence becomes the most popular Bodhisattva in China. Guanyin notably is not the Bodhisattva who cares about people’s afterlife, but the one help her believers rid of misery in this life.

Because of the pragmatic property of Chinese culture, indigenous transcendental or mystical religion can hardly find space to develop. Therefore, Buddhism was welcomed immediately by many people once it was introduced to China for its concern of the afterlife, and still remain the most popular religious tradition in contemporary China.

None of indigenous Chinese religious traditions has answers to ultimate questions such as the origin of the world and human being. Although these questions are not directly related to material world, they are significant as a part of human nature to seek for cosmological meanings and interpretations as a shield against the chaotic external world.⁴⁵ Without transcendent feature of religion, neither Confucianism nor Taoism can satisfy common people’s intrinsic needs for religion. On the other hand, folk religion, which provides certain ideas of cosmological meanings and transcendent experiences, has

⁴⁵ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 3-28.

no systematic theology to establish a complete and comprehensive cosmic order. This is a major reason why Buddhism and Christianity are able to root and develop in China.

Additionally, none of indigenous Chinese religious traditions has strict organization and regular liturgy. Strict organization benefits believers by encouraging each other, accumulating social capital, and building up collective memory. Regular ritual is important to revive believers' transcendent experiences and to reconfirm their religious identities. Protestantism as congregation can provide believers a shelter against enmity from the outside world.

Supply Side – Protestantism as Congregation

Religious congregation is to some degree a socially constructed “imagined community” whose integrity is held through the shared scripture and ideology, and its members are connected by a shared faith and an imagined identity.⁴⁶ In an exploration of congregations and community, Nancy Ammerman et al. found that congregations provide a place of belonging, a voice for powerless people, and contain material and personnel infrastructure that legitimates people's desire to help those in need. Congregations hold moral weight in a community so they have the ability to produce public trust and therefore to effectively generate communication and coordination of activities.⁴⁷ Robert Wuthnow also argued for the importance of congregation from

⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 1991).

⁴⁷ Nancy Atom Ammerman with Arthur E. Farnsley II and Tammy Adams, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 367.

another perspective. He pointed out that ongoing modernization has changed the religious landscape in the US since the 1960s, producing a decline in denominational loyalty and authority, a rising importance of congregations as a unit of religious attachment, and a cultural liberal or conservative divide within the church that impacts participation in social issues.⁴⁸ From a more general perspective, as Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld pointed out in their book *In Praise of Doubt*, under the circumstance of relativization, without the protection of take-for-grantedness, people tend to avoid “cognitive dissonance” which challenges their existing mindset, and find security within the group with similar ideology as “cognitive defense.”⁴⁹ Protestant church thus forms a “spiritual backyard” for believers and provides sense of belonging, moral weight, and protection against dissonance.

On the other hand, congregations provide members an infrastructure to develop deeper social connection outside religious occasions. Faith communities, as Robert Putnam argued, are “*the single most important repository of social capital in America.*”⁵⁰ He further quoted Reverend Craig McMullen that “The church is people.... It is relationships between one person and the next.”⁵¹ Members belonging to the same

⁴⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ Peter L. Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic*, 31-33.

⁵⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 66. *Italic as in the original context.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

congregation tend to stay connected outside religious gatherings, and regular churchgoers are more likely to reach out to civic activities and to have deeper informal social connections.⁵² The connection between members of the same congregation is sacralized by transcendent faith, as “sworn brothers” in Chinese tradition, and is consequently a stronger bond than its secular counterpart.

This connection is especially important to Chinese Protestants in rural areas, where agriculture stays the major income source while mechanization level is relatively low. Simultaneously, in most Chinese rural areas, a typical Protestant church membership is dominantly composed of the elders, women and the less educated, who are also the disadvantaged groups in immediate need of help. A social network of mutual help is hence much more significant than in urban areas.

Social Contextual Factor – Celebrity Effects

Another interesting factor stimulating the growth of Protestant population is celebrity effect. The prevalence of celebrity adoration is the product of modern mass media and communications.⁵³ This effect is widely applied to commerce by more and more marketers. They consider celebrity endorsers very powerful to improve marketing effectiveness in marketing-related activities, such as television advertisement or live promotion. A recent research on purchase intention toward the merchandise a celebrity

⁵² Ibid., 66-67.

⁵³ D. C. Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity* (London, UK: Macmillan, 2000)

among Taiwanese adolescents showed that the purchase intention toward the merchandise of a celebrity were stronger for adolescents in the celebrity adoration group than for adolescents in the celebrity non-adoration group.⁵⁴

The influence of celebrities increases dramatically as the proliferation of social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Typically, a well-known Chinese movie star would have over one million followers on *Weibo* (a Chinese version of Twitter), and the record so far is over ten million. Some religious activists also seek to expand personal influence through posting on *Weibo*, such as the Living Buddha Qiongbu of Tibetan Buddhism. More and more celebrities from Taiwan and Hong Kong publicly identify themselves as Protestants through *Weibo* or television shows, and many of them are using their social influence to promote Protestantism implicitly or explicitly.

For example, Jam Hsiao, a newly emerging singer from Taiwan, once publicly identified himself as Protestant in a talk show, and expressed his favor of cross-shaped pendant. In another interview, he told the journalist that he had received a lot of cross-shaped pendants ever since the talk show was broadcast. Many of his fans also wrote to him or left message at his fan forum website showing interest in Protestantism. Moreover, he now switched to another church for Sunday service because the one he had gone to was then fully packed by his fans. It is surprising that there are many posts at his fan forum website talking about Protestantism and experiences at churches. A girl

⁵⁴ Jyh-shen Chio, Chien-yi Huang, and Min-chieh Chuang, "Antecedents of Taiwanese Adolescents' Purchase Intention Toward the Merchandise of a Celebrity: The Moderating Effect of Celebrity Adoration," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 145(3) (2005), 317–333.

said: “It is so comforting that both Jam and I are children of the same God. I will keep praying for his future career as a super star.” Another post was: “Jam, I so very lucky being a fan of yours, because through your singing, I found the way to God. I am also a Protestant now.”⁵⁵ It is a subject of social psychology to find out how the illusionary connection between idols and fans is created and how this adoration mechanism works on their social behavior, but the influence of idols as “special friends” does exist and is arguably strong. Idols’ impact on their fans’ conversion to Protestantism will be further discussed in next chapter with a case study.

Social Contextual Factor – Protestantism in an Urbanizing China

Urbanization is an inevitable process in modernization. In China, urbanization appears in two forms: the expansion of urban areas and the migration of labor force from rural areas to urban areas.

Peter Berger once pointed out three options for religion and religious believers to engage modernity: The deductive, reductive, and inductive approaches. Respectively, the possibilities are reaffirming authority of tradition in defiance of challenges to it, secularizing tradition, and retrieving the experienced embodied in the tradition.⁵⁶ Based on this categorization, a Chinese scholar, Cunfu Chen, argued that the secularization of religion is unavoidable in the process of urbanization in China, because urbanization also

⁵⁵ This forum is closed to visitors, and fans have to register to view posts, available from <http://www.jam-hsiao.com/>

⁵⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

means the expansion of metropolitan culture and market economy, which are by no means religious. Villages will become suburbs of metropolitan areas, and the population of peasants will also decline. Urban churches will dominate the future development, and the most important resources to compete for are systematically trained church workers, abundant funding, and well-educated laymen.⁵⁷

Many other Chinese scholars, however, have a contrary opinion. A Hong Kong based sociologist, Jialin Liang believed that underground missionary work will be the dominant tendency in future decades, and urban areas will finally be surrounded by rural Christians.⁵⁸ A professor of religious studies at Renmin University, Jianbo Huang, once talked about the prosperity of Protestantism among migrant labors. He proposed that many migrant workers from rural areas in Henan Province, where the largest Protestant population resides, bring their Protestant faith to work, and preach among their fellow workers. Many “migrant worker churches” have been established in Beijing, and Protestantism proliferates quickly through these channels.⁵⁹ The situation of migrant workers in Chinese urban areas is in fact similar to Muslim migrants in West European countries. Migrant workers belong to the lowest social level in a city, and usually are alienated by aboriginal residents with contempt. They feel socially isolated and

⁵⁷ Cunfu Chen, *Zhuanxing Qi de Zhongguo Jidujiao: Zhejiang Jidujiao Ge'an Yanjiu (Christianity in a transitional China: A Case Study of Christianity in Zhejiang Province)*, 117-120.

⁵⁸ Jialin Liang, *Gaige Kaifang Yilai de Zhongguo Nongcun Jiaohui (Chinese Rural Churches after the Reform and Opening)* (Hong Kong: Jiandao Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ Interview with Prof. Jianbo Huang in October, 2008.

especially need recognition and acceptance in certain form to identify themselves against “the otherness.”

No matter what form it will be, Protestantism is now spreading in a wider sphere. The development of mass media and communication makes more information accessible to rural residents, including criticism of superstition and Protestant gospel; the adoption of modern life style, at the same time, urges people to fulfill spiritual quest at a higher level, a post-materialist level. These factors lead to an “unintended consequence” of the prosperity of Protestantism in China.

Social Contextual Factor – Protestantism in a Globalizing World

Globalization is a multi-dimensional process, which is driven by a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural, political, and biological factors. Culture wise, globalization also means communications between different cultures, internalization of certain internationally recognized rules, and consequently accelerates the penetration, interaction, and even confrontation between cultures and the subsequent consequence is an intertwined cultural map with multiple societal layers. In the 1920s, a “New Culture” movement broke out in China initiated by a protest against items in the Versailles Treaty on the Shandong problem. Facing the invasion and occupation of Western countries, a group of intellectuals who studied overseas believed that only a cultural revolution similar to the Enlightenment could save China and make it a stronger country. They therefore started an atheist movement against traditional Chinese culture, religion and superstition as a package.

Several decades later, Western culture reached China again with weapons including McDonald's and Hollywood movies. Protestantism, however, is no longer a target of cultural combats, but an appealing advantage of Western culture, representing a set of universal values and an ideological foundation responsible for the prosperity of the West. In a case study of urban Chinese Protestants, Fenggang Yang interviewed several typical urban Chinese Protestants, who are well educated and have good jobs. These young Protestants preferred to have bible study at McDonald's, and share the Western values. They found Protestantism more accessible and helpful in counter with tensions in daily life. He further argued:

In line with the Chinese pursuit of modernization and global integration throughout the 20th century, many educated Chinese tend to prefer a meaning system that is universal instead of particularly Chinese. In the context of a globalizing market under political repression, many Chinese perceive Christianity as liberating, democratic, modern, cosmopolitan, or universal. They regard Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism as backward-looking and traditionalistic, and thus incompatible with the market economy and increasingly globalizing world.⁶⁰

Globalization forms a larger social context to explain the proliferation of Protestantism in China. The more participation in international affairs, the more adaptation of international rules is required. Both the Chinese people and their government have actually been internalizing universal values in the wave of globalization, and the prosperity of Protestantism is simply one expression.

⁶⁰ Fenggang Yang, "Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald's: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 439.

Summary – Protestantism in Modernizing China

The first part of this chapter mainly addressed the split between Three-Self Church and House Church as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) was established in the 1950s. The involvement of state power in religious affairs directly led to this split, and the competition and even rivalry between these two parities is basically a reactive consequence of different political stands instead of theological interpretations. As a part of the flourishing Protestantism, two new types of Chinese Protestants are emerging in China: entrepreneurs and intellectual elites. The emergence of these two groups marks a turning point in the history of Chinese Protestantism. It is no longer a religion for disadvantaged people who are old, female or illiterate.

The second part of this chapter focused on analyzing the appeals of Protestantism to the Chinese people under conditions of modernity. The analyses included factors of demand side, supply side, and larger social context, and showed that only a comprehensive consideration of factors of all these three aspects can suffice the explanation of prosperity of Protestantism in China. The Reform and Opening accelerated the process of modernization and opened the gate of China for both economic opportunities and ideological alternatives. CCP unwillingly loosened regulation on control over communications somewhat for the purpose of economic viability, but also loosened its barrier against cognitive dissonance. The spiritual needs of the whole society that was suppressed under atheist propaganda awakened, and religious organizations thus found a space for development. The increase of spiritual needs is

fundamental in explaining the prosperity of Protestantism in China, because the demand for religion was never constant. The change of domestic and international social context coerced CCP to allow competition with alternative ideologies and more religious freedom, which was the prerequisite of spiritual awakening. As the next step, the consequent spiritual emancipation led to the openness of the religious marketplace, and the existence religious suppliers hence became meaningful.

Modernization indeed destroyed the authority of religion as the ultimate source of meanings of human life, pluralizes available alternative options as replacement, and also relativizes humans' mindset. Modernization, however, did not opt out religion as an individual choice as the foundation of worldview. As a former leading scholar advocating secularization theory, sociologist Peter Berger significantly modified his original conclusions about secularization in his recent works as more empirical evidence has shown the contrary. He suggested that the theory of secularization was simply too abroad and overlooked the religious possibilities as a personal choice under conditions of modernity. He stated this point in his influential essay, "The Desecularization of the World,"

To be sure, modernization has had some secularizing effects, more in some places than in others. But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization. Also, secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness. Certain religious institutions have lost power and influence in many societies, but both old and new religious beliefs and practices have nevertheless continued

in the lives of individuals, sometimes taking new institutional forms and sometimes leading to great explosions of religious fervor.⁶¹

The next chapter will discuss Protestantism as a personal choice in modern China. New trends in Chinese Protestant conversion will be identified, and an extensive case study will contribute a more detailed understanding of motivation of conversion at individual level. After all, besides the complexity at institutional level, Chinese Protestantism is very diverse at the individual level as well.

⁶¹ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Peter L. Berger (ed.) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 3

CHAPTER FOUR

A Study on Conversion among Chinese Protestants¹

There is a scarcity of empirical research addressing the in-depth personal conversion experiences of individual Chinese Protestants. Most existing research tended to study Chinese Protestantism from an organizational perspective, which provided an understanding at macro level and meso-level but mostly ignored micro-level. This chapter will depend on qualitative interviews to obtain depth in understanding contemporary Chinese Protestants' motivation of conversion. Since this study requires private face-to-face interviews of a specific target group, a clustered sampling was employed. All interviewees were randomly picked at Three-Self churches. No specific questionnaire or structured questions were used in face-to-face interviews, but all conversations were conducted surrounding the central question: Why and how did you become Protestant?

The fieldwork was conducted from November 2008 to April 2009 and covered four provinces—Yunnan, Anhui, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu. This includes one large city (Nanjing), two mid-sized cities (Kunming and Wenzhou), two towns (Chuzhou and Wuding), and one village (Gongshan). Among these provinces, Zhejiang and Jiangsu are economically developed, while Anhui and Yunnan are relatively underdeveloped. In

¹ An earlier draft of this chapter was adapted into a journal article published with the title of “Religion and Modernity in China: Who is Joining the Three-Self Church and Why,” *Journal of Church and State* Vol. 52 No. 1 (2010): 74-93.

fact, in some ethnic minority territories of Yunnan, people still rely upon primitive agricultural techniques and consequently remain in poverty and are isolated socially. Culturally, Anhui, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu have deep roots in traditional Chinese culture, especially the latter two, which were famous for being prosperous cultural and economic centers in dynastic China. Yunnan, on the other hand, was mainly occupied by ethnic minorities since antiquity and located remotely, meaning that the influence of traditional Chinese culture was relatively weak.

In terms of religion, Anhui has one of the highest growth rates of house church membership, while Zhejiang and Jiangsu are among the provinces with the longest history of Protestant missionary activities and consequently with the widest distribution of Protestants. In Yunnan, by contrast, most missionaries started their work only in the late nineteenth century, and mostly among ethnic minorities, resulting in a longer history of Protestantism among ethnic minorities as opposed to that of the Han people in the province.

At least ten lay members were interviewed in each church, and there were a total of eighty-eight Protestants out of one hundred and two interviewees. The rest of them were atheist or agnostics or believers of other religious traditions, who attended church services because of curiosity or interest. Information of interviewees sorted according to geographic regions is: thirteen in Chuzhou (Anhui Province), nine in Gongshan (Yunnan Province), twenty-one in Kunming (Yunnan Province), four in Wuding (Yunnan Province), thirty-four in Nanjing (Jiangsu Province), and twenty-one in Wenzhou

(Zhejiang Province). Demographically, the natural age of interviewees ranges from fifteen to eighty. The most important variable used in this research, however, is conversion age instead of natural age or any other demographic references such as gender. Demographic information of interviewees therefore will not be discussed further here.

The fewest numbers of in-depth interviews were conducted in Gongshan, mainly because of language limitations. Over ninety percent of the members attending services belonged to the local ethnic minority group, Lisu, and could not speak Mandarin.

Some Methodological Limitations

Before entering into my observations, a brief note is in order regarding the scope of my fieldwork. First, Three-Self churches in China are often ignored by scholars due to the movement's alleged "pro-Communist" theologies or "pro-Party" positions—ideas propagated by some house church leaders. This is one of the very reasons why I hope to shed more light on this group of Protestants in China. Based on my research, most lay believers in Three-Self churches consider the major differences between House church and Three-Self church to be worship locations and perhaps style of worship, not theological differences. They have little interest in political struggles or theological orthodoxy. They often use the hospital as a metaphor for the church, with the former being for physical disease while the latter is for spiritual maladies. From this perspective, the Three-Self churches are well-equipped hospitals, while house churches are private clinics. Both can cure diseases, but only if doctors diagnose and prescribe remedies correctly.

Second, in major provinces where house churches are developing the fastest (such as Henan and Anhui), most house churches remain hierarchical and closed to outsiders, and tend to keep their worship services secret.² This is reasonable considering the historical tension between local public security departments and these churches, but this also shuts the door to outsiders, including scholars conducting fieldwork. One Chinese scholar privately shared his fieldwork experiences with a house church in Henan, saying disappointedly that he had no way to access their congregation even with the introduction of one of his relatives who was a member of the church and guaranteed his credibility and trustworthiness. This scholar considered the house church there to be similar in many ways to a secret cult, with tight and close ties between members, maintaining a one-way, top-down information channel instead of promoting open communication between lay believers and religious leaders.³ This situation is very common among house churches in Henan and Anhui, and consequently limits my research to the much more receptive Three-Self churches.

Finally, my interviews were conducted according to random selection, but this technique is not without problems in contemporary China. With religion remaining a sensitive topic for many, open-minded believers who are willing to share their personal religious experiences become “ideal interviewees,” while introverted believers who tend to be quiet in front of strangers also tend to be passively overlooked. Random

² Jianrong Yu, “House Church in Rural China,” speech given at the Summit for Chinese Spirituality and Society, Beijing, October 8–11, 2008.

³ Ibid.

interviews, therefore, often take on a less-than-random character. Nevertheless, I have done my best to ensure the validity of the sample.

Finding Christ in China

As stated in previous chapter, the differences in Chinese Protestants' conversion motivations from generation to generation cannot be attributed to a single reason, but are affected by external macro-level factors (e.g., globalization and modernization), meso-level factors (e.g., the development of religious organizations), and micro-level factors (e.g., the switch of personal mindsets).⁴ I have sorted reported conversion motivations into seven categories: Healing, inner peace, life purpose, problem solving, personal pursuit, family influence, and friend influence. The “healing” category includes people seeking a cure for a physical illness; the inner peace and life purpose categories contain people looking for new meanings in their lives and a sense of security in a fast changing society; respondents with “problem solving” conversion motivations include those troubled by problems in both their material and spiritual lives, e.g., the unemployed and those disturbed by social and family relations; the “personal pursuit” category involves those hoping to better themselves in various ways such as improving their social skills, or personal character; and finally, the “influence of family and friends” categories include those converting due to social influences.

⁴ Fenggang Yang, “Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald’s: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005): 423–441.

Most interviewees who converted to Protestantism fall into the conversion age span from ten to forty (seventy of eighty-eight total Protestant respondents). Only three of these claimed to be seeking physical healing as one of their initial conversion motivations (Table 1), while among converts older than forty, the percentage is much higher.

Table 1. Conversion Motivation by Conversion Age

Motivation Categories	Less than 10	10 to 19	20 to 29	30 to 39	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 to 69
Healing (%)	0 (0)	4 (1)	0 (0)	8.7 (2)	42.9 (3)	100 (2)	100 (3)
Inner Peace (%)	0 (0)	28 (7)	40.9 (9)	39.1 (9)	71.4 (5)	50 (1)	0 (0)
Life Purpose (%)	0 (0)	44 (11)	72.7 (16)	65.2 (15)	57.1 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Problem Solving (%)	16.7 (1)	40 (10)	40.9 (9)	65.2 (15)	57.1 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Personal Pursuit (%)	0 (0)	20 (5)	16.8 (3)	4.3 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Family Influence (%)	100 (6)	68 (17)	45.5 (10)	30.4 (7)	28.6 (2)	50 (1)	0 (0)
Friend Influence (%)	0 (0)	10 (4)	31.8 (7)	34.5 (8)	28.6 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Note: a. Number of positive responses in parentheses alongside percentage positive response.

b. Data are based on my fieldwork in China from November 2008 to April 2009.

This is understandable considering the increased frequency of health problems in an aging population. According to the data, it is also easy to draw the conclusion that a “physical healing” motivation is also closely related to the converter’s financial situation and education level. Financially, eight of the eleven respondents in this category reported an annual income of less than 30,000 RMB, which places them in the lower economic classes in China.⁵ Five interviewees in this category completed a junior high level of education, while the rest are evenly distributed into categories from illiterate to graduate education. It is generally believed among average Chinese that the poor and

⁵ Four respondents reporting “healing” as a conversion motivation reported an annual income lower than 10,000 RMB, four reported an annual income between 10,000 and 29,999 RMB, one reported an annual income between 30,000 and 59,999 RMB, one reported an annual income above 90,000 RMB, and the remaining interviewee in this category did not provide income information.

the uneducated tend to seek cures for physical illness by turning to deities, for they cannot afford expensive medical treatments, and do not have enough knowledge to understand the false nature of superstition, including religion.⁶ However, underlying this general attitude is a belief in the supremacy of science and the correctness of atheism. According to further conversations with these converts, the primary reason for them to turn to religious or spiritual help was not financial; instead, their disappointment in science led them to seek supernatural alternatives. Two examples follow that are typical cases of those reporting “healing” as a conversion motivation and those who expressed disappointment with modern medical science as a reason to seek the Church.

Mr. Zheng, a seventy-five-year-old man whom I interviewed in Chuzhou in 2008, had just claimed internal confirmation and was attending a required fellowship to study further about the Protestant faith, in preparation for his baptism.⁷ His wife was baptized in 2007, and had been trying to persuade him to attend church services together since then. Mr. Zheng had been suffering from serious asthma and arthritis for decades, and

⁶ This statement is based on my interviews with over fifty average Chinese people who received different levels of education but have at least a basic knowledge about religion and atheism. The majority of these interviewees are living in urban areas. It is interesting to note that people in rural areas, farmers or businessmen, are more apt to show the subtle balance between communist atheism and traditional theism in their minds, and it is more natural for them to accept this mental situation in comparison with urban residents. Although most Chinese fall into this situation unconsciously—e.g., no religious activities but fear of ghosts—urban residents, especially well-educated ones, tend to pay more attention to their spiritual status, and from time to time some of them would feel confused about their own fear of ghosts as atheists. They usually explain this mental conflict by “the influence of traditional Chinese culture,” but still decline the possibility of the existence of supernatural beings.

⁷ It is a general requirement for confirmed members of the TSPM Church to attend a one-year study course to expand their knowledge about Christian faith before receiving baptism. Some pastors explain this requirement as a useful way to consolidate their faith and understand it better before making the decision of receiving baptism. To them, the rite of baptism is much more important than inner confirmation, because it is a public declaration of Christian faith rather than private belief.

their children had paid a lot of money for a cure from both hospitals and private clinics with no success. He promised to his wife that if her “friends from church” and her prayers can heal him, he would join them—and it worked. He consolidated his faith by reading the Bible and hymns for his wife, who is illiterate. He confirmed his faith in February, and hoped to be baptized in December 2008.⁸

Ms. Chen, a sixty-five-year-old woman whom I interviewed in Nanjing, had been attending services at St. Paul’s Church for over ten years. At the time of her conversion, her cousin suffered from abdominal distention, and her two-year-old granddaughter still could not speak. She was a Buddhist before meeting a Protestant on the way to a temple and for the first time in her life, during their conversation, she started thinking over a vital question about her Buddhist faith: “Why should I believe in a wooden idol instead of the real God in heaven?” Upon returning home, she burned all sculptures and paintings of Buddha, and found a pastor from St. Paul’s Church to pray for her cousin. She believed that worshipping false idols in her home was the cause of her cousin’s illness, because the pastor’s prayer cured her cousin immediately. This miracle, a miracle beyond the capability of modern medical science, convinced her of the power and truth of Protestantism. Thereafter she brought her granddaughter to the church for help. The young girl passed out upon entering the chapel, but with the pastor and other members’

⁸ Interview with Mr. Zheng, in Chuzhou, China, on November 3, 2008.

prayers, she woke up and started talking normally. She claimed that no hospital could diagnose the causes of disease for her cousin and granddaughter, let alone the cure.⁹

There are also several reports of people seeking physical cures in the church because of its low cost compared with traditional medical treatments. In my research, however, most of those reporting financial motivation were healthy and approached religious healing more as a type of preventive health care. While it is possible that converts motivated by healing turn to the church for financial reasons, it appears that financial pressure was not a necessary cause of conversion. While annual income may be low among those in this category, these respondents reported having financial support from their children.

These findings are supported by a study conducted in an urbanizing rural town in Shanxi Province in 2002, where 82 of 168 Protestants were motivated by physical healing for their family members or themselves to convert, with the percentage as high as 48.8 percent. Most interviewees in this study did not clearly mention their financial problems; instead, over half of them mentioned the failure of modern medical science. Many of them went to folk religion temples or worship sites first for help, but their disappointment led them to churches and to abandon folk religion.¹⁰

⁹ Interview with Ms. Chen, in Nanjing, China, on November 9, 2008.

¹⁰ Zhijun Liu, *Xiangcun Dushihua yu Zongjiao Xinyang Bianqian (Rural Urbanization and Religious Transformation)* (Beijing, China: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2007), 172-176.

Interestingly, it is precisely over the matter of such miracles as spiritual healing that deep divisions can be found between Chinese Protestants and others. To many typical Chinese atheists, miracles such as spiritual healing are scientifically inexplicable, and are therefore false, superstitious, and unacceptable—regardless of the god to whom the miracle is being attributed. To religious Protestants, however, miracles provide evidence for the veracity of their truth claims. To them, all other religions are false, and only Protestantism is true. They are among the least tolerant of “false religions” and traditional superstitions. Among the eighty-eight Protestants that I interviewed, only nine of them, mostly in their twenties, expressed a willingness to respect the beliefs of other religious traditions. Most interviewees expressed denial of other religious traditions: “They are wrong,” “it is not understandable,” “they should stop believing in those false idols immediately to save themselves,” and “I would not allow my family members or friends to follow superstitious traditions, because they are false” are among the responses collected on the topic. Additionally, seventy-three interviewees explicitly expressed their objection to their family members and friends of other faiths either verbally or behaviorally. For example, if converters’ acquaintances turned to other gods for birth protection or for a male baby, they reportedly tried their best to dissuade them. Fortune telling, psychic consultations, and healings by witchcraft are all among superstitions to which they object.

Still, due to the deep roots of Confucianism embedded in Chinese society and historical religious mutual influence, it is difficult to draw a strict line between cultural

customs and religious rites. Consequentially, there are many “exceptions” to ordinary Chinese Protestants, such as ancestral worship rites. On the contrary, sometimes believers belonging to other religions would criticize Chinese Protestants as a group of people with “no respect for either parents or ancestors.”

Many interviewees considered the difference between the motivations of “inner peace” and “life purpose” very subtle, and these two concepts indeed are connected. Both are psychological needs for a shield against the internal chaos experienced without a meaning system and provide personal retrospection; they are, in Inglehart’s words, “post-materialist” demands.¹¹ The former emphasizes withdrawal from a restless life, while the latter stresses the efforts of rediscovering significance in one’s life. To some degree, the realization of one’s life purpose becomes possible only after finding true inner peace and starting to reconsider the really important things in a busy modern life.

Thirty-five percent of converts mentioned a need for inner peace as a conversion motivation and fifty-two percent noted a need to find purpose in their lives. The majority of these respondents are young, falling between the conversion age spans of twenty to thirty-nine, and eighteen to thirty-one, respectively. Based on information collected, interviewees who felt frustrated and had heavy pressure in their work or family lives were more likely to give these two responses. Interestingly, among interviewees

¹¹ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 223-251.

whose conversion ages were between forty and forty-nine, 71.4 percent attributed their conversion motivation to finding inner peace, and 57.1 percent mentioned life purpose.

In this group, many were newly experiencing unemployment. This sudden loss of original social status, stable income, and consequently their sense of security led to their loss of courage, purpose, and hope. A very good example is Ms. Ma, whom I interviewed in Kunming. She was thirty-one years old in 2008, was brought to church by her mother-in-law the year before, and had been attending services regularly at St. John's Church since then. She was laid off in 2006, and tried very hard to start her own small business. This resulted in her life becoming much busier than before, and her income increasing quickly as well. Nevertheless, she started feeling troubled and restless inside, and conflicts within her family arose as her income grew. She realized that she had lost herself in the pursuit of economic fortune and her strong will to escape poverty. Her busy new life brought her both money and trouble; in her words, "making money is meaningless to me now, because money cannot give me real joy and peace aside from temporary material satisfaction." Ms. Ma's mother-in-law became a Protestant in 2005, and she witnessed in her mother-in-law changes happening: "She is much more easy-going than before, and appears to be joyful. She used to enjoy fighting with me, and sometimes I would feel that she hoped to see my husband divorce me. After she converted, however, she became another person, I would say." The change in her mother-in-law persuaded Ms. Ma to go to church. She once thought about joining Buddhism, but the atheist education she received since childhood prevented her and,

moreover, she never met anyone in the Buddhist temple as happy as her mother-in-law. After one year of studying basic biblical knowledge, she received baptism on Easter 2008. “Protestant faith enlightened me to free myself from materialist pursuit, because nothing on earth will last longer than God’s word, and there is nothing we can bring to Heaven in the future. Seeking the eternal truth in God’s word is what we should insist on.”¹²

More than half the Protestants I interviewed referred to “problem solving” as their motivation for conversion. If the pursuit of inner peace and life purpose are clearly spiritual pursuits, problem solving is all about one’s daily life. Interviewees at different ages have different problems to face. Among those between the ages of ten and nineteen, study and family relationship, e.g., relationship with or between parents, were two major issues; for people between twenty and twenty-nine, study, job hunting, work, and love troubled them most; family and work became central issues again when the age group reached thirty to forty-nine, while family issues centered around relationships between spouses, conflicts between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law, parenting issues, and sometimes extra-marital affairs. For respondents older than fifty, problems related to life after retirement, such as decreasing income and increasing living costs, loneliness, and the need to find continual meaning in life.

My a priori assumption was that younger people would be less likely to fall into the “problem solving” group, because of the level of emotional and financial support most

¹² Interview with Ms. Ma, in Kunming, China, on October 19, 2008.

still received from their parents. After interviewing people who converted while younger than twenty, however, it appears the pressure from these young respondents' parents and from society is suppressing them much more seriously than was my anticipation. Additionally, intense family relationships heavily influenced this group's conceptions of marriage and child-bearing.

Mr. An, a seventeen-year-old man who had been baptized on Christmas 2007, had been regularly attending services at St. John's Church in Kunming. He was from a rich family with an annual household income of over 100,000 RMB, and material things had never been a problem for him. Since his parents were both running private companies, he essentially was raised by his grandparents. Most memories of his parents included endless quarrels and countless excuses for forgetting important family days, such as New Year's Day and his birthday. After entering high school, he found that he gradually lost interest in studying, because he felt no impetus to work hard. He described college entrance examinations as a very heavy but useless burden for him, because he had no life goals to which to aspire. At the same time, he was determined to remain single throughout his life due to his own experiences: "I did not want to be responsible for anyone else, because I am not capable of making any commitments. I was scared of having a family and I lacked the confidence to raise a baby well. Also, a baby would be another heavy burden financially besides the mortgage."

On a spring Sunday in 2007, Mr. An happened to enter St. John's Church and attended his first service after escaping from a fight between his parents. The sermon

was about forgiveness. He sat there, hearing nothing but “forgiveness” repeatedly. He did not dare to ask the pastor any questions, but he pondered on the sermon all week. “What that sermon taught me most was not forgiveness itself, but the discovery of hatred in my heart. I suddenly realized that I had been feeling hate towards my parents, school, and myself for a long time, and that is exactly why I had lost purpose in my life. The most important lesson I needed to learn was not mathematics or English, but forgiveness.” He said that he still felt anxiety about future family and child-rearing issues, but that at least he had started to enjoy living like a normal high school student. “The change that St. John’s Church brought me is priceless, and I will remind myself about this change through my life as a Protestant.”¹³

Ms. Pang, a thirty-two-year-old woman, received baptism at the age of twenty-two when she graduated from college in 1998. She was originally from a small town outside Nanjing, and her experiences during college in Nanjing compelled her to stay in a metropolis instead of going back to her hometown. In 1997, her college English teacher brought her to church for the first time, and told her to pray for anything troubling her. Being a whole-hearted atheist, she took this initial church visit as a joke. Two factors, however, eventually led her back to the church: her boyfriend and her search for a job. To maintain her relationship with her boyfriend and to find a better paying job required her to stay in Nanjing, but her job-hunting had been fruitless. As graduation approached,

¹³ Interview with Mr. An, in Kunming, China, on October 23, 2008.

her boyfriend expressed some impatience. Ms. Pang was so afraid of losing both her love and her good life in a big city that she returned to the church she had visited with her English teacher. She attended all services, fellowships, and Bible studies available to her and prayed regularly. She admitted that her purpose initially was purely pragmatic, but what she read and heard in church changed her mind. She found peace in her anxious heart, and began to get along better with her boyfriend. One month later, she received an offer from a promising company in Nanjing with a very satisfying salary. She got married soon after, and in 2003 her company decided to sponsor her graduate studies. By 2008, she had become a happy wife, a good mother, and a successful department manager. She attributed all of her achievement to God's guidance and protection. Ms. Pang's next goal was to introduce God's mercy and glory to her husband, and she expressed hope that they could have a Christian family before long.¹⁴

Most interviewees showed an interesting attitude as to the difference between asking Christian God and other gods for solutions to problems in daily life, while only a few answered that they never thought about this question before. Several interviewees of the former group obviously had been once challenged by others with this question. Their explanations could be categorized to: 1). Christian God is the true god, and His power is pure and just, while other gods are various types of demons, and their powers are evil; 2). Christian God is the true god, and He will allow the right things to happen based on His

¹⁴ Interview with Ms. Pang, in Nanjing, China, on November 10, 2008.

own judgment instead of ours; 3). Christian faith is a life style, and Christian God does not ask for anything besides a close relationship with His children, while other gods require certain types of repayment additional to belief, which prove their hypocrisy; 4) Christian God is ubiquitous almighty being, while other gods are just wooden or clay idols created by human beings, having no real power. Facing critiques on their belief as “superstitious,” most of them would try to explain their faith and share their own experiences, but only a few would claim correctness based on scripture. They considered concrete testimonies more powerful to outsiders who were biased and had no basic Christian knowledge.

Although only 10 percent of the Protestants I interviewed declared “personal pursuit” as one of their conversion motivations, the fact that they were almost all either in their teens or early twenties is significant. Personal pursuit is a reflection of the need for self regulation and the desire for self-improvement. It can be pragmatic, such as to practice English regularly and to have a better social life, or spiritual, e.g., to be a better person. Several college students I met at English services provided by St. Paul’s Church in Nanjing shared the same personal pursuit to make more friends, especially foreign ones, and to improve their social skills and English abilities, which would benefit them in the future. Some of these young people had very strict and conservative requirements about their behaviors and thoughts. They considered churches as places where they could find the real self withdrawing from the superficial, vain, and pressurizing life.

Two final factors were significant in converts to Protestantism, that of family and friends. As the table makes clear, the percentages of respondents who were converted before age ten and between ages ten and nineteen are the highest, at 100 percent and 68 percent, respectively. Among those who converted between ages 20 and 29, the percentage reaches 45.5 percent as well. This phenomenon is not new, as one of China's most influential Protestant leaders, Wang Mingdao, converted to Protestantism because of the influence of a school friend.

Among those I interviewed who had converted before ten years of age, most were from ethnic minorities: four out of six are Lisu, one is Han and grew up near the Lisu villages, and one is Naxi. Ethnic minorities usually reside in remote mountainous areas, and therefore often live in poverty. For the Lisu people in Gongshan, Protestantism has even become a part of their ethnic tradition, mixing with aboriginal folk religions and Tibetan Buddhism. Economically, simplified Protestant rituals greatly lighten the burden of sacrificial offerings set by traditional folk religions, and make religious faith more accessible to ordinary people. Protestantism also sets a new series of life customs to regulate believers' daily lives, such as temperance, and hence reduced unnecessary living expenses. Finally, early Protestant missionaries created written language systems for Lisu people and helped them preserve and spread their culture. Reading the Bible along with singing hymns was even a primary method of education used to improve literacy among the Lisu people.¹⁵

¹⁵ Jianbiao Lu, *Lisuzu Shequ Fazhan Yanjiu (A Study on the Development of Lisu Communities)*

Besides the special case of ethnic minorities, it is clear that a new generation of Chinese Protestants is gradually forming under family influence. Compared with previous family education that was dominated by atheism or Confucianism, the growth in Protestant upbringing is definitely a big change, and one which suggests Protestantism may only just be taking off in China. Those who converted under the strong influence of friends were mostly concentrated around the age spans of twenty to twenty-nine and thirty to thirty nine, with the percentages of 31.8 and 34.8, respectively. Among this group, a special category of “friend” was quite influential—that of celebrities. While the influence of celebrities has long been recognized in marketing and advertising, this impact is rather unexplored in the case of religious conversion. Apparently, however, celebrities can strongly influence their fans’ preferences in the realm of religion as well.

Ms. Zheng, when interviewed in Wenzhou, is a good example. She was twenty-two at the time of the interview and had confirmed her faith two years earlier in 2006, but was waiting for her upcoming baptism. Her motivation to convert was complicated, but an important part of that process was the devout Protestant belief of a celebrity whom she idolized. Before 2006, she had always been an ordinary college girl, whose main concerns were her studies and love. After three years being together, her boyfriend broke up with her for another girl. The first thought that came across her mind was: “If our love, which I cherished so much, could be smashed over night, what

(Beijing, China: China Social Sciences Press, 2007).

can be true in this world?” She started deviating from her normal life, and became more and more depressed. One day she happened to read an article about her idol, a male singer in Taiwan. From that article, she learned that he and his family had all converted to Christianity when he was a teenager, and that his conversion ended his life as a rebellious high school student. God guided him to the right path, and during the process of struggling with his “old self,” he discovered the real meaning of his life. Inspired by her idol’s experience, Ms. Zheng decided to try attending the church nearby. “My mother is a very devout Buddhist. She chants and burns incense three times per day, and goes to Buddhist temples regularly. She even became vegetarian three years ago,” Ms. Zheng noted. “Her loyalty to those Buddhist sculptures appears ridiculous to me, and I always scorned religious believers like my mother,” she recounted. But “Protestantism completely changed my view.” While she admitted that her motivation for coming to the church was incorrect, “for it was because of my indulgence in another idol.” She saw that “God used my indulgence to lead me I think I must thank my idol for being an unexpected tour guide on my way of seeking truth.”¹⁶

These interviews testified the central idea of this dissertation at the individual level. Instead of one single reason, Protestantism is flourishing in contemporary China due to intertwined factors of demand-side, supply-side, and social context. Very few of those I interviewed claimed any single reason as their initial conversion motivation, because

¹⁶ Interview with Ms. Zheng, in Wenzhou, China, on November 20, 2008.

conversion is an important and complicated decision to make for anyone, and probably more so among those who were raised in an atheist society. Conversion is usually the result of a combination of internal needs such as physical disease, mental problems, and other pursuits, and external forces such as the influence of family members, friends, or even celebrities. And, of course, the emphasis on these particular factors varies on a person-to-person basis. These stories, however, provide an important glimpse into how these processes work and will hopefully be useful for other researchers trying to understand the complexity of the spread of Protestantism in China today.

Summary: Chinese Protestants – A Diverse Group

Protestantism in China is very diverse. While the distinction between the house church and the Three-Self church is immediately apparent, regional differentiation is also very evident, including the related aspect of level of socio-economic development. Regional differences, including variation in the implementation of religion policy, obviously influence the membership composition and organizational structures of churches. In fact, these two factors significantly influence each other, as members with different backgrounds naturally have different spiritual requirements and wish the church to be organized accordingly.

Another dimension of the diversity in Chinese Protestantism regards the believers themselves. Believers can be categorized based on several differentiating qualities, including their age, gender, educational background, and annual income. Such variables have often been found to be significant determinants of various correlates, such as

political, social, and economic values. For example, in more urbanized areas, Protestants tend to be younger, wealthier, and better educated, while in more remote areas where Protestants are predominantly ethnic minorities, Protestantism has become incorporated into certain ethnic traditions, and the influence of urbanization is less significant.¹⁷ Membership composition also determines the organizational structure of the churches to some degree. Those younger, wealthier, and better-educated Protestants also tend to know more about Protestantism abroad, have greater spiritual requirements, and often demand a more “open” organizational structure, a trend that is very apparent in churches in Beijing.¹⁸

This mutual influence appears more obvious in house churches, because their development is relatively independent with less governmental administrative oversight. The structures of the Three-Self churches, however, differ very little across various regions due to their being under the management of the TSPM and the CCC.

Another significant difference among Chinese Protestants, one that has received very little attention, is that of the different motivations underlying one’s conversion to Protestantism based on their age at the time of conversion. Conversion age, rather than natural age, is actually a more effective predictor of believers’ initial motivations for conversion in China where, unlike Western countries, there are no deep institutional

¹⁷ Junxue Han, *Jidujiao yu Yunnan Shaoshu Minzu (Christianity and Ethnic Minorities in Yunnan)* (Kunming, China: Yunnan People’s Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Shining Gao, “Christianity in Urban China,” speech given at the Summit for Chinese Spirituality and Society, Beijing, October 8–11, 2008.

religious roots and where people usually have few points of access to religious knowledge, not to mention religious education. Therefore, people who became religious in childhood naturally have different reasons for doing so in comparison with those who convert later in life, and it is generally believed—in China as elsewhere—that a person's ability to make a reasonable decision independently regarding religious belief grows as one ages. Based on information collected through my interviews, very little evidence is found supporting hypotheses that suggest a relationship between decision-making ability and age, although some correlations exist between conversion age and initial conversion motivation. Data collected here, however, also provide some support to the idea that the conversion motivation is also affected by education level and financial situation, though discussion of these two correlative effects will have to be investigated further in a subsequent study. Suffice it to say, however, that conversion age is a factor related directly to education level and financial situation, as the situation of a junior high school student is not comparable to a middle-aged, well-paid professional with a higher education when it comes to the importance of such factors such as financial situation, educational level, and social experiences.

Despite differences due to various individual characteristics, the continuously changing external environment also strongly affects the mindsets of different generations in China as well. The dazzling progress of modernization and globalization is gradually revising the younger generations' understanding of the world around them and themselves. They have more access to, and knowledge of, other parts of the world than

previous generations; they see and hear about greater possibilities in life, and therefore develop greater personal aspirations. The world now provides them with greater alternatives to the way of thinking and living prescribed by authority figures, including their parents and the state.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

At the dawn of the 20th century, Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that “God is dead,” declaring the collapse of Christianity as the ultimate source of absolute morality and opening the debate over the role of religion in modern world. There rose the theory of secularization, and it dominated sociology of religion for nearly a century. All three founders of sociology of religion, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, acknowledged the doom of religion under conditions of modernity, followed with other more recent preeminent scholars including Peter L. Berger and David Martin. Religion, however, not only did outlive this pessimistic prophecy, it has thrived worldwide with only two exceptions: the academia and Western Europe.¹ The world is not secularizing, and quite on the contrary, it is desecularizing.

The trend of desecularization in China has posed a serious challenge against atheism, which has been an important component of the orthodox ideology of communist China since 1949. As an alternative meaning system with high competitiveness, the revival of religion initiated an erosion of the legitimacy of CCP’s governance. Protestantism is a typical example in this spiritual awakening. The population of Chinese Protestants has been increasing dramatically after the Reform and Opening, and hitherto there is no sign

¹ Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 9-11.

of decrease yet. As an unexpected part of this global religious upsurge, the prosperity of Protestantism in contemporary China becomes an intriguing phenomenon requiring more research to discover the secret ingredients in its success.

This dissertation answered the question: How did Protestantism survive and even flourish in contemporary China under the pressure of rigid religious policies issued by the atheist Chinese government? Three sociological theoretic frameworks were applied to test in the Chinese case: demand-side model developed from Weberian tradition, supply-side model incorporating economic model, and consideration of religious regulation. Additionally, in a modernizing world, external factors are indispensable in this discussion, such as urbanization and globalization. This dissertation therefore analyzed the prosperity of Protestantism in contemporary China from three perspectives: individual at micro-level as the demand-side; Protestant institution at meso-level as the supply-side; and government regulation and other factors at macro-level as social context. Combining literature review, theoretical inference, and concrete personal interviews, this dissertation reached the conclusion that the prosperity of Protestantism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and cannot be appropriately interpreted without taking all aspects into account.

Religious marketplace in China is different from that of Western countries where most theories in sociology of religion were developed. It is highly regulated and watched by the government, and has little space for both religious supply-side and demand-side. The way these parties behave in China has distinctive properties

compared to those on “free market.” Religious suppliers have to compete with each other but also the ruling party for a bigger share, while this competition is impossible to be fair given the overwhelming advantage of the ruling party.

As the Cultural Revolution ended, economic development rose to the first priority on the Chinese government’s agenda. This fact forced the Chinese government to end its rule as a totalitarian regime, to open the gate of China, and to enter an authoritarian period allowing more freedom and toleration. The influx of alternative ideologies challenged the orthodoxy of atheism, and led Chinese people to question the necessity of atheism and search for other options. The change of social context liberated Chinese people from the suppression of their spiritual pursuit, and justified this pursuit with international experiences. The rise of spiritual demand urged the modification of Chinese religious policies and the alteration of religious institutions as spiritual suppliers. The existence of spiritual demand, therefore, is the prerequisite of the existence of a religious marketplace, but it is not a taken-for-granted fact under high pressure of rigid regulation.

This dissertation was an attempt to find a middle-way between demand-side, supply-side and religious regulation to interpret the prosperity of Chinese Protestantism in a modern context, and shed some light on Chinese Protestants worshipping in Three-Self churches by showing their faces as individuals instead of a blind flock behind pro-CCP leaders.

Although this dissertation only represents a small effort to understand Chinese Protestantism from multiple perspectives, it did demonstrate how the mutual action between lay believers, religious groups, and the government influenced and promoted the growth of Protestantism in a modernizing China. Chinese society is becoming more stratified, so are Chinese Protestants. The growing population of this group is turning them into a social force that can no longer be ignored. At this stage though, this group has not yet shown any sign of initiating or accelerating large-scale social and political transformation overtly. It is also too early to predict how influential they would be in the process of democratization. Many questions regarding civic social functions of this group and church-state relations, however, are worth further research. Are there any possibility and social space for Chinese Protestants to be more influential in public arena? Policy wise, how will the Chinese government respond to the rapid growth of Protestants since more and more academic, clerical and legal professionals are calling for its attention and a rapprochement? How much will the Chinese government compromise with this group, if any?

Protestantism is flourishing in China as an epitome of the contemporary world: It is an outcome of collision and fusion of Eastern and Western civilizations, and also a quest for a space between modernity and tradition. It is such a fascinating topic that deserves further research, and its unpredictable future requires continuous attention. Nevertheless, exploration would not be real excitement if explorers were easily satisfied

with immediate facts. More “whys” should be asked, and more answers would be discovered.

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