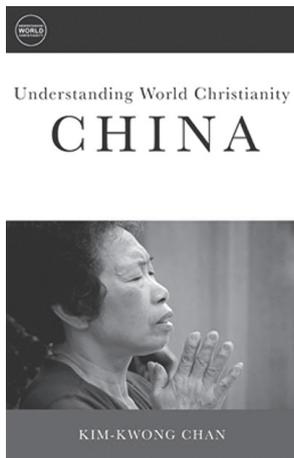


Book Review by Annie Lam

Kim-Kwong Chan. *Understanding World Christianity: China*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019. xiv + 200 pp (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5064-1660-1.



Tens of millions of Chinese today living under an atheist Communist regime begun in 1949 identify themselves as Christians. Despite the fact that the Chinese authorities restrict freedom of religion and strictly control religious activities, the “seemingly powerless” Christian communities in China now are “silently growing with unprecedented depths of penetration” into society. It is indeed “a new chapter of Christianity in China,” filled with tensions and struggles torn between loyalty to the Church or to the state, the author said, their witness of faith, sufferings and spirituality can be contributions to the universal Church (p.70).

The volume *Understanding World Christianity: China*, written by Reverend Kim-Kwong Chan (陳劍光), is an insightful, resourceful, comprehensive and current study into “the spiritual reality” of the Chinese Christians – traditions Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant - in the contemporary time

of China. It examines the history and the struggles of the Chinese Christians living their faith in an apparently “hostile environment” since the start of Communist rule in 1949. With a re-emergence of Christians in China since the 1980s, the book studies how the Christians live their faith in the socio-political and globalized contexts up to the present day. Christianity in China is to be understood from “the experiences of Chinese Christians and the factors that have contributed to their present ecclesial reality,” according to the author (p.4). The book is based more upon the experiences of Protestant Christians, and narrates the realities of the Catholics and the Orthodox believers in parallel with them. Chan, a renowned scholar in the fields of theology and China studies, with two doctorates and trained at a Catholic university, has researched Christianity in China for over 40 years. Interestingly, the Chinese pastor in Hong Kong, embarked for his first contact with the Church in China as a nutritionist in Beijing in early 1979, and began his visits to hundreds of Christian communities of the three traditions in China (p.xiv;4). His published works include *Holistic Entrepreneurs in China* (2002) and *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (1993).

This 200-page volume on Christianity in China is part of a Fortress Press Series on *Understanding World Christianity* whose published works include East Africa, India, Mexico and Russia. The Series’ general editor Dyron Daugherty remarks in this book that the new era of world Christianity now shifts from a Eurocentric paradigm to other continents across

the world. Of the ten largest national Christian populations, including China, only two are from the Western world (p.vii, ix).

The structure of Chan's book, as in the whole Series, addresses the key issues of Christianity in China from six perspectives, namely chronological, sociopolitical, geographical, denominational, biographical and theological settings; and are well connected. The book cover, along with the title and the author's name, depicts a colored- picture of a Chinese woman immersed in her prayer, devoutly frowned, and with her palms tightly hold together - a common posture of religious believers in China.

The *Introduction* describes Christians in China as living in a "caged community" and "as undesirable elements" living under the Communist regime since 1949. "Since then, Christians have lived in a political cage," the author writes (p.1). The Christian population dropped drastically since the beginning of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 because the new government embraced an atheist ideology with the objective of eradicating religion from the public domain. Below is a review of each chapter, by referring to the author's summary indicated in his *Introduction*.

The first chapter, *Chronological*, begins with a historical account of the introduction of Christianity into China by the Assyrian community (Nestorians) in the seventh century, and later by other attempts of evangelization by the Franciscan

and the Jesuit missionaries in the centuries that followed. The Orthodox Church was formally established in China in 1685. The first Protestant mission to the Chinese was led by Dutch missionaries in the early 17th century; but many scholars refer to Robert Morrison as the first Protestant missionary to China in 1807, the author notes.

Then, the situations of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Churches in contemporary China are introduced since 1949 to the present, with their interactions with the Chinese authorities, tensions and struggles, adaptations to the socialist environment, and persecutions. The Christians almost completely disappeared from public view during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). With the Reform and Open Policy in the 1980s, the Christian groups have grown enormously for the Protestants. Some face tensions and rivalry with the government and among themselves; but many maintain links with their global Christian communities, according to the author, the Protestants with the World Council of Churches, the Catholics with the Holy See, and the Orthodox with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Demographic and economic data on China are often used in this book for comparison and analyses. According to the author, in 1949, the Christians combined amounted to about one percent of the 450 million Chinese population, of whom Catholics numbered 3 million, the largest group. The Christians, cited in the 1982 Communists' *Document Number*

19 on religion, amounted to 6 million in 1982. In 2010, the Protestants rose to 23 million (unofficial figures claimed 50 to 90 million) and Catholics 12 million. Orthodox believers stayed in the thousands. Meanwhile, China's white paper on *Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief* of 2018 states the figures 6 million and 38 million for Catholics and Protestants, respectively, out of a total of nearly 200 million religious believers, including those who practice Buddhism, Daoism and Islam.

The second chapter, *Sociopolitical*, starts with explaining the meaning of freedom of belief in religion included in the PRC Constitution. It then looks into the Chinese authorities' ideology on religion and its policy on religious affairs, or a political framework with which Christians in China live, advocating independence and self-administration under government intervention. The chapter explains how the administrative apparatus on religious affairs operates from the 1980s until the present, namely the Communist Party's United Front Work Department and the Administration for Religious Affairs under the State Council, and how they formulate the religious policy, along with the security offices, to control religions (pp. 48-51). The chapter observes changes in the government's attitudes and policies toward religion. Since 2010, "a significant ideological shift in China" led to more intervention in religion especially Christianity, and the author cited three factors to the shift: "national security, the political theory of 'Peaceful Evolution,'

and the model of religious ecology.” In March 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping at a national religious work conference, affirmed new directives in religious policy: to direct, instead of guide, all religions in China. All religious groups should be “Sinicized”, meaning religions cannot “promote values of the Western world and must incorporate social values as advocated by the Chinese government,” the author said (p.55). In 2018, the implementation of the State Council’s revised *Religious Regulations* on February 1 further tightens control over religion. Minors being banned from entering churches, and joining religious activities and church-run kindergartens cause anxiety among the Church people (p.55). More, the Catholic clergy of the unaffiliated groups are strongly pressured to register. That led the Holy See to issue the *Pastoral guidelines of the Holy See concerning the civil registration of clergy in China* on June 28, 2019 to deal with the registration issue.

The chapter essentially provides the responses of the Christian communities towards the religious policy. In the 1980s, the re-emergence of religions drove some Protestants to revive government-approved groups of Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and form the China Christian Council (CCC); the Catholics with the Patriotic Association (CCPA), along with the bishops’ college (Bishops’ Conference of the Catholic Church in China, BCCCC). The government-sanctioned bodies take a pragmatic stance to cooperate with the government; whereas, some Christians in China prefer

to form their autonomous Christian communities (ACCs) or house churches for the Protestants, and underground or unofficial groups for the Catholics.

The chapter discusses China-Vatican relations, noting that since 2014, both sides have called for “a halt to hostility” on issues relating to episcopal appointments—the Chinese bishops ordained without papal approval, the future appointment of Chinese bishops, and the recognition of underground bishops by the Chinese government. Eventually the *Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement* was signed on September 22, 2018; but the content of the *Agreement* remains unrevealed. Pope Francis released his *Letter to the Catholics in China and to the Universal Church* on Sept. 26, 2018, stating that it was a result of “a lengthy and complex institutional dialogue” taken by his predecessors Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. The Holy See desires to support “the preaching of the Gospel” and “to reestablish and preserve the full and visible unity” of the Catholic community in China. Some Catholics welcomed the *Agreement* while others do not expect the deal to improve the situation of the Catholic Church in China; and clerics of the underground Catholic communities are reportedly being detained. Local Chinese officials still harbor distrust of the Vatican, despite the signing of the *Agreement* (*Tripod*, Winter 2018; *ucanews.com*, October 12, 2018). All in all, the author considers the *Agreement* “an important sign of the normalization of the Chinese Catholic Church” (p.184).

The third chapter, *Denominational*, is the only one that deals solely with the Protestant Christians in China, without mentioning the Catholic and Orthodox communities. Protestant denominations and traditions that existed in China before 1949 like the Church of Christ in China and the True Jesus Family are introduced. Some have merged into the framework of the TSPM/CCC groups, but some remained outside. The author introduces the ACCs or house churches, usually unregistered. Started as rural-based, the ACCs have moved to urban centers and attracted professionals, business people and intellectuals. In a way, this provides a better understanding of the background of ACCs in main cities, and why such communities prosper.

The fourth chapter, *Geographical*, looks into the various manifestations of faith by Christian communities living in diverse economic and cultural heritages due to geographic differences. Here the experiences Protestants and Catholics are similar. The chapter examines how Christian expressions differ between rural and urban populations, including among ethnic minorities, who live mostly in the peripheral areas of China. In 1985, only 15 percent of the total Chinese population lived in urban areas; as of 2018, about 60 percent live in the city. By 2020, possibly two-thirds of the population will be urbanized. Catholic villages, whatever their origins, are generally centers of the fervent religious life and are seedbeds of vocations, but urbanization has changed this model of faith transmission. Differing from the Protestants, there was

no major surge in the Catholic population from 1980 to the present probably because of the familial transmission of the faith rather than from the religious conversion, commonly found among Protestants (p.115).

The chapter looks into the case of Wenzhou in Zhejiang province, known as the Jerusalem of China, a region with the largest Christian population in China. About 1.5 million Wenzhou people are in the business sector all over China, and at least 20 percent are Protestants. Since 2014, Wenzhou churches suffered a massive campaign, ordered by party secretary of Zhejiang, Xia Baolong, to remove all the crosses on the church buildings. Many Christians were injured while protecting their crosses. Pastors like Reverend Joseph Gu Yue-se, head of the Zhejiang Christian Council, who publicly defended the Christians' views were stripped of their positions (p.123-124).

In fact, the Catholics were victims too. On July 24, 2015, 89-year-old Bishop Zhu Weifang and 20 priests of Wenzhou protested outside government offices against the removal of crosses; and the unregistered community of the same diocese, led by Bishop Shao Zhumin, also issued a statement on July 30 objecting to the government's move. (*ucanews.com*, July 24, 2015; *AsiaNews*, July 30, 2015). When Xia was appointed to head the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Office in February 2020, his repression against the Wenzhou churches was recalled (*SCMP*, Feb. 23, 2020).

The chapter, *Biographical*, focuses on the spirituality of Chinese Christians through the witness of faith of three Protestants and a Catholic, Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai (1916-2013). Brother Li, a simple peasant, is the first believer of his village in Yunnan; Pastor Wang Zhiming (1907-1973) of Zhaotong, also in Yunnan, was executed and remembered as a great Christian martyr; Lui Xiaomin, a young woman with no formal training in music, has written hymns that moved many Christians. Lui's story brings out the role of Church music in praise and worship activities. Young Catholics in China enthusiastically sing *Taize* hymns and Christian songs, for instance, *Lord, you send me off*, in their prayer gatherings and formation activities. A Chinese Catholic song-composing contest was inspired to take place in 2014, 2017 and 2020 (*RVA*, Feb. 21, 2020).

Bishop Jin, recognized by both the Chinese authorities and the Holy See, is always remembered for his contribution to the formation of clergy and sisters, and the development of the Shanghai diocese. The author described him as “a man of all seasons,” representing those Catholics “caught between many historical and political forces: communism and Catholicism, Chinese patriotism and Western imperialism” (p.167).

The final chapter, *Theological*, reflects on various issues such as the contribution of Chinese Christian experiences to church-growth theories, the ecclesiological challenges to the universal Church, especially for the Catholics. The biblical

symbols of the Cross, Rebuilding the Temple and the Golden Lampstand are used to describe the three stages of growth of Christian communities since the 1980s until now. Apart from the materialist influences from secular society, the author perceives challenges facing the Christian Churches in China that need more attention: unity among Christians in China; whether Christianity in China is still foreign; and the impact of globalization and localization on the Chinese Christian communities.

Published in September 2019, the book was timely for the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC on October First, and for the first anniversary of the *Agreement* between China and the Holy See. The author says he unfolds a journey of faith of a “caged community;” and now ends the book with a quote from a prominent foreign China watcher Jesuit Father Laslo Ladany (1914-1990): “Expect the unexpected” (p.200). Father Ladany, the editor of the *China News Analysis*, was well-known for his research on Chinese affairs from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Thanks to the author’s research and analyses, this book is relevant to mission leaders and to those who want to understand how Protestants and Catholics live in China today, and certainly those who follow China-Vatican relations and Orthodox Church issues in China. May this study continue to possibly include the Jewish tradition in China as well.

