

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR OF  
TAO FONG SHAN

*Note: Dr. Peter Lee, the director of the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture at Tao Fong Shan was interviewed by Sr. Beatrice Leung, executive secretary of Holy Spirit Study Centre. He explained to us the role played by his study centre between the Chinese Christian Church and the Christian churches outside China. He also discussed with us the attitude he maintains towards the Chinese Christian church.*

Leung: Rev. Lee, you have been in the field of China research for more than ten years. May I ask what is the purpose of your studies?

Lee: *It is not correct to say that I have been in this field for over ten years. I have been working at the Tao Fong Shan Study Centre eight years only. Before we start our conversation could we clarify the term "China study", because it is a very broad term. Could we narrow it down a little, so that it is easier to discuss.*

Leung: Since you are a minister, it seems very natural that the focus of your interest would be on religious matters or on theological problems which relate to China. Isn't that true?

Lee: *We could divide the question of religion into many areas. One angle could be Christianity in China, including both Catholicism and Protestantism. Since I am a Protestant, it is natural that I focus my attention on this aspect. But this does not mean I disregard the situation of the Catholic Church in China. On the other hand, the term "religion" also embraces other beliefs besides Christianity. Buddhism, Islamism, Taoism, and folk religions are also within the realm of our concern. We try our best to look for materials on these religions. I have found that the publications of the Chinese Institute of World Religions provide valuable material worthy of our attention. I have not had time to study these materials in detail. If we had enough manpower it would be best to go to China to have personal contact with scholars of various study centres, and do more research there. We also keep in touch with the political, economical and social problems of China. Though we do not wish to appear as experts in the study of these*

problems, religious affairs cannot be detached from the whole social context of China. For example, the government policy of religious freedom is closely related to the socio-political atmosphere. In our concern for China, we must not only observe China's relations with Catholicism and Protestantism. Attention must also be paid to how religion can help shape the future of the masses in China and how it influences the welfare of the people. Anyway, we do not have strictly limited boundaries in our study of religion in China.

Since the centre is a Christian institution, our perspective is based on our belief. Our immediate aim is to have concern for the situation, difficulties and happenings of the Chinese institutional church. But this concern is not our ultimate goal. Furthermore, as there are people in the church, and the Christian Church exists within the Chinese culture, it is natural for us to be concerned for the happenings and future of our brethren in China. Our concern



Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre Chapel and  
Porcelain Workshop

even includes the future of Chinese civilisation. But this concern is still not our ultimate goal. Our ultimate aim points to our Christian faith in the broadest sense (which is not the same as the institutional church). Here we come to the level of Theology. When we talk about the faithful in Christianity we focus not only on those who have joined the institutional church, we also allude to the place of the Chinese in the Kingdom of God. Here we also come to the question of the meaning of Christianity in a society where the great majority are non-believers. As Christians we must be concerned about the sufferings, hopes, yearnings and struggles of our Chinese people through the issues of Human Rights or through reading their literature. Then we try to reflect on these problems of life from a Theological point of view. Therefore we could say that we have to study every aspect of China to begin to understand the Chinese people.

Leung: Now I understand that the ultimate aim of your studies goes back to Christianity. No wonder you pay so much attention to the situation of Christianity in China. I understand that Christianity has received different treatment in China because of the unique political atmosphere. Formerly, some people liked to follow evangelism while others advocated the principles of the Three Self Movement. In this context may I ask what future direction the Church in China should take?

Lee: You mentioned Evangelism and the Three Self Movement. Actually the Three Self Movement, includes the Three Self Patriotic Association and the Christian patriotic movement. Here we are not going to discuss these movements in detail because readers are familiar with them. On the other hand, it is impossible to discuss Christianity in China without putting it in the social context. So we shall go through these movements very briefly. In the past we saw many phases of religious policies in China, some strict, some lenient. These phenomena went back and forth. Right now we could say China is in a period during which religion is enjoying a certain amount of freedom. But how great is that amount of freedom? Everything has its own yardstick. Nevertheless we can say that religious freedom does exist in China. The People's Republic of China is a socialist nation deeply imbedded in Marxist ideology. It is certain that this kind of nation has its own interpretation of religion which is quite different from that of Western countries. They regard religion as a kind of "inevitability", instead of having a true respect for it. Whenever state policy is tightened, religion is immediately restricted.

Leung: Why do Communist countries have a feeling of inevitability toward religion?

Lee: *This question has a long historical background. Some say that religion is the product of man. Even when social conditions have been improved, yet because of human weakness it takes a very long time to do away with religion altogether. Therefore they simply acknowledge that religion has existed during the greater part of human history.*

*At the present stage, China would not strongly attack religion. On the contrary, she is giving religion a chance to enjoy a limited freedom. If we overseas Christians or the Christians in China mindlessly provoke the authorities by saying that "We do not acknowledge your viewpoint of us," then we may bring about a counter-effect. Of course it is very difficult to draw the line between which conditions are favourable and which are unfavourable to religion. Likewise it is difficult to see when the Church should stand up in protest and when it should patiently endure. Because of this we could say that state-religion relations are something very subtle. Sometimes the church is put through an unbearable ordeal, sometimes there is the possibility of co-existence between state and church. All this takes great wisdom to discern. It is very important that overseas Christians not disturb or irritate the authorities.*

Leung: Do you have the feeling that in the past outsiders have caused disruptions in the Chinese Christian church?

Lee: *Yes. Take a concrete example of the smuggling of Bibles. The Chinese government and the Chinese church made it clear that during this period of adjustment and under the principle of Three Self Movement, they are trying their very best to provide as many Bibles as they can. The Chinese government also laid down regulations stating that it is forbidden to smuggle Bibles into China, and Chinese customs officers enforce this regulation. Yet it happened that one million copies of the Bible were smuggled into China. This gesture inevitably was interpreted as interference and lack of respect for the Chinese church. Such smuggling could bring about many counter-effects. Other kinds of minor gestures were very subtle also. What is regarded as anti-revolutionary and what belongs to the realm of religious freedom, is treated differently according to each context. All this illustrates the delicate relationship between state and church. In the bureaucracy of the People's Republic of China, there is a department called the "United Front".*



If within a given period of time United Front Policy could successfully unite the different groups other than the communists, then there will be a good chance for religion. You might ask what is the meaning of the United Front? This is a very complex question. We overseas Chinese have our own interpretation which is sometimes coloured by our personal feelings.

Leung: Rev. Lee, could you explain to us the work of Tao Fong Shan and the Christian Studies Centre?

Lee: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre was established in the 1930's by a Norwegian Missionary Dr. Karl Reichelt who had a great interest in Buddhism and dialogue with Buddhists. After the death of Dr. Reichelt, the trend of our work expanded. Our Art Department was founded in the 50's when there were refugees coming from China. Some of them were converts from Buddhism and were skilful in painting porcelain for their livelihood. So they were employed by Tao Fong Shan to paint porcelain with a Christian flavour, and this department became one unit of the Ecumenical Centre. This Study Centre originally did not belong to Tao Fong Shan but was founded in the 1950s. From the name of the original centre - Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religions and Culture - we can understand the scope of our studies. Our object of study is Chinese religions. Therefore we do not limit ourselves to studying Buddhism but include other religions such as Taoism, Islam and popular folk religions. As far as Chinese culture is concerned, this covers a vast area of studies. Because of historical circumstances, some seven to eight years ago, we began to pay attention to the development of Communist China. At that time the Chinese Christian church was not open, and the Christian church in Hong Kong did not pay too much attention to that issue. We did not have as many restrictions as other organisations so we were free to do research in this field. When we discovered that more Chinese Christian churches had opened, we could see there were some projects and issues that we could not but engage ourselves in. Last year, the Study Centre was united again with Tao Fong Shan and was called the Study Department. Presently in Tao Fong Shan we have three departments, the Art Department, the Study Department and the Laity Training program with its attached chapel of worship. We have the intention of establishing a retreat house which will be a place of recollection and prayer for spiritual training. It should be pointed out that we also put emphasis on spirituality. Due to the lack of personnel we cannot do much in this area, but within our limitations we try our best to make this retreat house a place of prayer, reflection and spirituality. In the future if we have enough assistance we can provide more in

*the area of the training of the laity.*

Leung: A moment ago you said that in the process of your China studies there are some issues that "you could not but engage yourself in". What are these?

Lee: *Although we have to attempt to play the role of prophet, we must also have some psychological preparation to admit that what we know is very limited. In the previous thirty years the Communist leaders have brought about drastic changes in China, and everything there is still in the process of change. Even though we are very limited in our knowledge, yet sometimes we are obliged to make comments and express our views on some issues. Therefore we need some solid facts before we can make any remarks. At the same time we make it known that we have no deleterious motivation behind our studies, or that we are preparing ourselves to resume mission in China when opportunities arise. We aim only at understanding and concern, and to see their problems from a positive angle. In spite of the fact that we do not engage in mission work ourselves, we are nevertheless, concerned over the deeper meaning of "evangelisation" in the Chinese context. When Chinese Christians come to know our mentality and attitude, they are very willing to establish friendship and trust when we come into contact with one another. As we are living outside the Chinese environment, it is a fact that we cannot fully understand the real situation there. Each time we view important events we try to respect them and accept them as they are and to see things from a less biased angle, and in this way we can form a bond of friendship with the Chinese Christians. Actual opportunities for us to meet Bishop K.H. Ting and the leaders of the Three Self Movement are very rare. Yet each time we have met, no matter through correspondence or in person during conferences, I personally have felt that we could easily build up a certain mutual trust and confidence. Therefore it has enabled us to provide a bridge between China and those outside.*

*With regard to first-hand materials, if we find something which in itself is significant enough for publishing and the Chinese Christian Church also feel that this could be shared with us, we naturally get their permission to have this translated for our periodical - Ching Feng. This principle applies not only to the matter of first hand information, but also to reports written after visits to China. Some church members in Hong Kong and Chinese Christian leaders might not totally agree with us. Even some articles in Ching Feng might express viewpoints different from those of the Chinese Christian Church. But none of this*

arouses ill-feelings. It depends very much on our attitude. And we maintain a friendly attitude in our contacts with the Chinese Christian Church. We are not forced to go into one particular area of research. We cannot say that we have plenty of material for our research. Yet we are fortunate enough not to be compelled to stop at a certain way of looking at things without other choices.

Leung: You have said that Tao Fong Shan is playing the role of a bridge. Basically it is very difficult to be a bridge. The demands are energy consuming but gain no praise. May I ask what kind of difficulties you presently are facing in the performance of your role?

Lee: You are perfectly right that it is very difficult to be a bridge. It is a very difficult kind of work, yet all the energy we spend does not vanish in the air. It requires skill, wisdom, and we must balance all aspects before we can say the job is well done. If that really is the case the work will be appreciated by the people around us. It is inevitable that we will have difficulties in this area. Because everyone has his own viewpoint. From different angles and historical backgrounds, it is very natural that each one has a different way of looking at China. It does not mean that we are helpless when surrounded by difficulties and hardships. On the contrary, we remind ourselves to work with skill and patience amid difficulties. It is challenging enough to understand something in a society which is completely different from ours, purely from the point of research. Isn't it more difficult to go a step further and play the role of a bridge after we have understood the real situation? It is not necessary to say that there are difficulties. But what is most important for us is to do something meaningful despite these obstacles.

Leung: What kind of difficulties are you facing? From what direction do they come?

Lee: In Hong Kong it is not easy to study China in depth. This is the first difficulty we have to face. It is even more difficult to transmit the findings of our research to our Christian brothers in Hong Kong, since we have different views and backgrounds. However we are aware that this Study Centre is for the service of the Christian church. In the Christian Church of Hong Kong, pastors and parish priests for example, in their daily affairs do not have much time to do research on the problems in China. On the other hand the Christian Church is a big organisation, in which there are certain kinds of power influencing the whole situation. The

bigger the organisation, the more diverse the opinions. Some of these opinions are conditioned by certain elements, and thus exert a kind of influence. It is very hard for the church to do research work within this kind of big organisation because it is difficult to transcend all these limitations. But it is not absolutely impossible. This does not mean that our study centre has already transcended all the hardships and can do its research without any bias. But compared with other organisations, we can be more transcendental and have a clearer perspective. Then we also have the duty to assist other people to look at the problems of China. It is quite difficult to help others to be more transcendental in viewing China and the Chinese Church. It needs a lot of conscience raising. Seminars, personal contact, group discussion, and co-operation on a project would be a means to this end. To entertain the Christian Leaders from China who visited Hong Kong is a very good example. When this group of Chinese Christians leaders made their visit to Hong Kong, Tao Fong Shan itself could assume the responsibility of hosting them. But we would rather have done this as a joint project with the Christian Churches in Hong Kong. It was not easy to arrive at an agreement with the Christian Council, but I found that it was an excellent opportunity for our own formation. It was proved that every one involved benefited. With the coming of the Chinese Christian delegation, the colleagues of the Christian Church of Hong Kong had to formulate a commonly approved way to host them. Actually some of them were not willing to do the work, some of them were afraid, while some did not know what to do. Eventually we all joined together to work through it. As I told you before, it was possible for Tao Fong Shan to shoulder everything solely, but we gave the Hong Kong Christian Council a chance to contact the delegates from the Christians in China. We planned to accept criticism and share praise together as a group. It worked out smoothly. From the experience of the reception of the Chinese Christian leaders we discovered that we reaped the fruits of conscientization. On the side of the Chinese Christian delegates, at the beginning they were a bit afraid. At this juncture, we really played the part of bridge by encouraging them to be at peace in their first contact with the Hong Kong Christians. And we promised our assistance wherever it was needed.

Leung: It is true, Rev. Lee, that you have very successfully played the role of bridge. In our Catholic Church we also need some one who can be a bridge. We hope you can give us more guidelines in this area and encourage us to proceed in the same endeavor. Thank you.