

Impact of China's Economic Development on Christian Communities in Zhejiang Province

Chen Cunfu

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Since the Tang, Yuan and Ming dynasties until the 1940s the spread of Christianity in China, generally speaking, met resistance from two aspects of Chinese society. The first was mainstream Chinese traditional culture rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, and the second was China's closed, natural economy, and patriarchal social system. From 1949 to 1980, the differences in ideology and social systems increased. In the final analysis, however, resistance to the spread of Christianity comes principally from the two aspects of culture and the social system.

In 1992, China officially announced to the world that it would implement a market economic system and build a "socialist market economic system" with Chinese characteristics. This has been the most meaningful, earth-shaking change in Chinese history, with a significance far greater than any previous changes. While the focus of the Chinese experts in the West has been on how China will be different from the former Soviet Union and East Europe, our focus has been on what changes will it bring to the economy, politics, culture, education and religion of China. In addition to culture and the social system, Christianity in China is also facing the increasing challenges of modernization and secularization.

In 1995, we undertook a project for the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia called "The Trends of Different Religions under the Conditions of the Market Economy." Then in

1997 and 1999, we undertook a survey of the changes of Christianity in cities and villages in recent years. The shortcomings of these research projects were their lack of quantitative analysis and survey accuracy. From 2000 to 2001, we collaborated with Dr. Jean-Paul Wiest on the Maryknoll project. We chose three types of Catholic churches in Zhejiang Province, and gave them the same questionnaires. There are 26 questions and 184 choices (answers) for the questions. From 2002 to 2003, in collaboration with friends from abroad, we made a survey of three Protestant churches in Longgang Township and Pingyang County of Wenzhou by using the same questionnaires with little change. Ten representative Catholic and Protestant churches were surveyed. Our sample population was between 20 and 30 percent of the whole church population. For several reasons—the low intellectual level of the believers, everyone busy with his or her own business, and some hesitation or concern about the survey—the response rate was between 92 and 95 percent, of which about 90 percent were valid.

These results were not ideal from a social statistics point of view. However, we must understand that it was not a survey of college or university students. It is really very difficult to prepare a questionnaire about Christianity in current China. Not only do we need to find survey objects with representative values, but there also must be mutual trust and a cooperative relationship between the local church and responsible government officials. Halfway through, we had to give up our survey in several churches because the local government and church were concerned that the published results might prove disadvantageous and bring them trouble. Because of these concerns, we make the serious claim that these results are based on objective, scholarly research, without trying to promote a specific argument or point of view. We offer to scholars some questions, based on these results, for further research and discussion. As to how results will be used by third parties, it is up to them.

1. Changes in believers' occupations

A believer's occupation is the foundation of his/her economic status and social identity. The biggest change in the secular life for Chinese Catholics, and especially for Protestants, is

the change in occupation. In the past, most believers were peasants mainly engaged in food production, eking out a yearly living. Believers in the cities, including county-level cities, province-level cities and big cities, were only city dwellers without occupations. Most of them were family women or street inhabitants. Women depended on their husbands or their children. Now, like in the coastal area of Zhejiang Province, old cities are expanding quickly. The original county-level cities or district-level cities (e.g., Wenzhou, Ningbo) are being changed into new cities and a number of new cities and new harbors stand out. For example, Longgang Township in Cangnan County of Wenzhou is known as "the first peasant city in the whole country." Before, two-thirds of the believers there were peasants. Now they are bosses of privately owned businesses, chairmen of boards, or managers and owners of shares in pooled capital companies. The survey shows that not less than 40 percent of the Catholics and Protestants living in towns or county-level cities are owners of individual, privately owned businesses. Not less than 20 percent of the people living in the joint areas between cities and villages also are these kind of owners. Former peasant believers who were engaged in agriculture now depend on the markets. They try to produce things like vegetables, chickens, ducks, pigs, fish, etc. to respond to the needs of the market. Some peasant believers, like some non-believers, tend to become owners of farms and they contract work sites and hire inland peasants to plant for them. This is not rare in the Ningbo area.

In the background information, I specifically introduced several Catholic villages, principally Mapeng Village, in the west of Zhejiang Province. It was an area of rice and grains. From 1987 to 1992, following the local non-Catholic villages, some Catholic villages like Mapeng, Qiaotoushang, Huawenqiang, Zhiwuli, etc., all switched to planting orange and tangerine trees. In 2000 there were 332 families containing 1100 people in Mapeng Village in more than 20 occupations, and there have been more changes in the past three years. Because of the continuous expansion of Quzhou City, the area of Mapeng Village has become part of its suburbs with a highway passing through the neighboring area. Economic development requires considerable labor. The mechanization level of agriculture in China is comparatively low, and labor is cheap; furthermore, all the towns and building projects need peasant labor.

Therefore, in the slack farming season, most of the young people go out to do some manual work to earn money, and more and more young people do not go back to their home villages.

The incomes of the Catholic families have greatly increased as the direct result of the changes in the professions. Like the local non-believers, they left their thatched shacks and built two or more story homes with all kinds of electrical equipment. In 1999, less than 32 of the 332 families had telephones. In 2003 most had telephones. All this has led to changes in secular and consumption styles, and to a series of changes in their religious lives. At the same time the appearance of the Church has also changed.

2. Increase in Church property

Accompanying the change in the Chinese market economy system, the second change for Christianity has been the great increase in Church property. Numerous new churches have sprung up in the area.

The Catholic and Protestant Churches' source of income is donations of their followers. Consequently because of the differences between cities and rural areas from the 1990s, the disparities between the rich and the poor, coastal and inland areas, and among different income communities have become increasingly sharper. The properties of different churches are also different. The churches in some inland provinces and mountain villages are still fairly poor, which is a situation very different from the rich Wenzhou area. In the 1990s, 400 new churches of different sizes were built in Wenzhou and these were built by the generous donations of believers, especially by believers who owned individual businesses. We listed a number of churches in the 2002 article, which included four big Catholic churches in Pingyang County (Qiancu Church, Xiaojiang Church, Kunyang Church and Aojiang Church). All the churches were built from 1996 to 1999 at a cost of more than 2,000,000 RMB (or US\$250,000) each. (A university professor's monthly salary is less than 2,000 RMB, or US\$250). Currently Xiaojiang Catholic Church is the tallest and the most splendid church in Wenzhou. Yongping Church, on our survey list, was finished in 1999. A Protestant church, which is also in Yongping, was expanded, and a new church, called Heaven Gate

Church, was built in the neighboring village of Yangmen. Bigger than all the former churches in Wenzhou, it is seven stories tall, occupies 0.8 acre and can hold more than 5,000 people. The cost of the church is kept secret.

3. Emergence of a new type of Christians in China today

The third change in Christianity in China in the market economy is the emergence of a mainly new “boss-believer” type group, in addition to the former peasant believer group and city street inhabitant believer group.

We gradually drew this result from our surveys of Christianity in some new cities and towns in Zhejiang Province since 1995. In December 2000, we delivered our paper called “City Inhabitant Identity Christians” in the “Christian Thought and the 21st Century Conference” held at Hong Kong’s Baptist University. In the beginning of 2003, based on our research on Catholics in Zhejiang Province, we published “The Emergence of a New Type of Christians” in *China Today*. This new survey on Protestants in Pingyang has further verified our point of view. We believe that Chinese Protestants and Catholics are mainly from two sociological groups, i.e., peasant believers and old city residents (there is a similar phenomenon from big cities to county-level cities). From the end of the 1980s, two types of new believer groups gradually appeared. The first group is formed by individual owners in the private economy, managers of companies, and chairmen of boards of trustees. These types of believers are popularly called “boss Christians.” They are similar to the city residents of the emerging cities in Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries. Therefore, we call them “city inhabitant identity Christians.” The second group is called “cream of intellectuals” Christians, who are mainly from Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and other big cities. They are not like the former “town-dweller of the lower middle class” housewife type of believers, who depended on their husbands and children, were not well educated and mainly did house work. Currently the number of these “cream of intellectuals” Christians is still quite small. They are primarily in universities and secondarily in hospitals, research institutes or joint-venture enterprises. Currently, the “boss Christians” are the most visible and they have

several qualities: they are young and well educated, with a wide field of vision. They are capable of managing things, and they are rich. Consequently, they are the pillars of the Church economy. Although most of them are lay people, they control the Church administrative committees. With young priests and preachers, they form two new emerging influences in the current Wenzhou local Church. Accompanying the development of China's economy and the expansion of Christianity, the three new emerging influences (young generation clergy, "boss Christians," "cream of intellectuals") will be more conspicuous.

4. Impact of secularization and modernization on believers' religious lives

The fourth change in Christianity under the condition of the market economy system is the increasing mobility of believers and the decrease in the number of businessmen going to Church. Questions 6, 7, 11-16, and 20-24 of the questionnaire focus on the impact of secularization and modernization on believers' religious lives and spiritual lives.

From 1949 to 1984, the location of believers' (including Catholics and Protestants) religious activities basically did not change because the former villages and cities did not change too much, and the number of the churches had increased instead of decreased. In 1985, and especially after 1992, accompanying the increasing floating population in cities and towns, old cities were torn down, transformed and expanded. Consequently, the administrative system in former natural villages was destroyed as new cities were built. Thus, some believers go to new churches for Sunday worship; some go to former churches; some occasionally go to local churches and sometimes go to churches other than their local churches because they are doing business away from home.

Question 6: "Where are you from?" was asked in order to learn about believers' mobility. The answers at the three Catholic churches in Pingyang are listed below:

This village or city	123
This county, neighboring villages or towns	200

This province or other county or city	9
From other province and working here temporarily	1
From other province doing business here	0
Does not select an answer	2
Total	335

Question 16: “What will you do if you cannot go to your original church for Sunday worship due to doing business somewhere other than your hometown?” The answers at the three Catholic churches in Pingyang are listed below:

It can be exempted (cancelled)	13
Self bible-reading or prayer	204
No missing it if doing business in local area	56
If doing business other than hometown go to the local church	38
Does not select an answer	24
Total	335

Answers of Protestant believers in Pingyang are basically the same as the answers of the Catholic believers in Pingyang.

From the above tables, we can see the situation of the floating population in the Pingyang Catholic church. 60.8 percent of believers think they are allowed not to go to church for reasons of being busy in doing business; they think that it is permissible to stay at home to say some prayers or do bible-reading. 13 Catholics (more than Protestants) even think that religious activities can be exempted. Both Catholic and Protestant believers' responses to the Chinese modern market economy and tendency toward secularization are the same. This is different from what Max Weber suggested in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* about the differences between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The survey shows that among Catholics or Protestants only a few think that they are allowed not to go to church due to being occupied in business. However, many think that it is permissible to do some bible-readings or say prayers in working places, and they do not need to go to church. The percentage of this group among

Protestants is 53.67 percent (394:734), while for Catholics is 60.89 percent (204:335). It is an interesting phenomenon that the percentage for Catholics is even higher than for Protestants.

Mapeng Village has a well-known Catholic history of 270 years. There have been six priests from the Family Fu and five priests from the Family Wang. Originally all villagers planted crops. By the end of the 1980s, after the switch to planting orange trees, there were about 20 different occupations. Those who go to church on Sundays are old people and children; very few young people go to church. Generally it is same in Wenzhou, Wenling and Shuijiang, etc. They have their own saying: "It is okay to have God in your heart; shops cannot be closed, work cannot be stopped; you must earn money if you have the chance."

The market economy has added a new dimension to secularization. The reality now is that money making on Sundays is much more important than Sunday worship. It also shows that the religious concepts of believers are changing. However, both Catholics and Protestants deny that their religious devotion is now indifferent. They consider their belief to be still very firm and pure.

5. The quality of believers has improved and there is a change in social concepts in adjusting to secular society

This is the fifth change, due to the adjustment to the market economy. It is happening now in both Catholic and Protestant Churches.

In the past, there were three "mores": more women, more old people, and more illiterate people. There is no big change now in both Catholic and Protestant churches. Question 1 of the survey shows that the rate of comparison between female and male believers is quite close. However, because there are more peasant Catholics and there are more believers in villages, especially in some inland provinces, generally speaking there are more female believers than male believers.

From the point of view of the age of those joining the Church, the rate of young people joining is obviously higher now. According to the survey, the percentage of believers under the age of 55 in Pingyang Catholic Church is 76.4 percent (256:335). The

percentages for the four Protestant churches are 61.8 percent (107:173), 53.4 percent (94:176), 51.26 percent (101:196) and 69.84 percent (132:189). Believers under the age of 55 in the four churches make up more than half of the total population of believers. Actually this is a little lower than the actual percentage, because quite a number of young believers are busy with business and seldom go to church, except for some big feasts.

With regard to the level of education, generally speaking most believers have graduated from elementary or middle school. Few are high school graduates, and even fewer graduated from college. This situation has changed considerably from the past when the majority was illiterate.

Based on questionnaires, general research and individual interviews, we can see that, accompanying the tremendous changes in Chinese society from the 1980s, the believers' ability to adjust psychologically to the market based society has greatly improved. In brief, there are four changes in the social (not theological) concept of believers.

(i) In the early 1980s, many believers thought that believers could not do business. Believers especially could not be bosses who hired some people to exploit them. However, the present survey shows some changes. The answers to the questionnaire show that no Catholic or Protestant believers think that believers cannot do business, and only one believer thinks that believers cannot be bosses. With regard to being bosses, 35.5 percent of the Catholic respondents and 64.1 percent of the Protestant respondents chose the answer that "It is all right for a believer to be a boss and hire some workers if it is not illegal, and if it is for the glory of God and benefit of the people." It shows the believers' sense of virtue when it comes to doing business.

(ii) Believers on the one hand insist on pure belief, while on the other hand they are broader minded than in the past and can live harmoniously with non-believers.

The survey shows that only 181 Catholics, or 54 percent, are from families whose members all are Catholics. 17 Catholics are from families whose other members are all non-Catholics. 129 Catholics are from mixed families of believers and non-believers.

In the four Protestant churches in Pingyang, 426 believers, or 58.03 percent, are from families whose members are believers.

230 Catholics, or about 68.6 percent, responded to the survey that they encourage family members to join the Church. 89 Catholics, about 26.5 percent, think it does not really matter. Only 5 Catholics do not encourage their family members to join the Church. Only 2 Catholics strongly oppose family members joining the Church.

Among Protestants, 41.97 percent believers encourage their family members to join the Church or hold an attitude that "it does not matter." Only 16 among 734 believers do not encourage family members to join the Church, and 1 person strongly opposes. Compared with the past, it shows that the situation in Christianity is much better since the 1990s.

The response to Question 19 shows that the believers' attitude toward non-believers has changed considerably too. Most believers think that believers and non-believers should have mutual respect for one another.

Question 19: "What do you think if some practice a religion, some do not practice any religion and some belong to other denominations or other religions in one family?" The answers of Catholics in Pingyang are as follows:

Evangelization to family members and invite them to join the Church	164
Practice individual beliefs and respect each other	129
Does not matter	8
I do not know how to do it	21
Does not select an answer	13
Total	335

129 Catholics, or 38.5 percent, chose the second answer, "respect each other," and 41.28 percent of Protestants chose the answer "to respect each other."

(iii) Believers' psychological adjustment ability obviously has improved. Most believers agree that modern society has a good effect or at least has a good side for the development of the Church.

Question 13: “Do you think that modern society and the current market economy system are good or not good for the Church that you participate in?” Here are the answers of Catholics in Pingyang to this question:

Good	201
Not good	0
It has both a good side and a bad side	63
I do not know	65
Does not select an answer	6
Total	335

The answers of Catholics in Mapeng to Question 13 are as follows:

Good	105
Not good	19
It has both a good side and a bad side	32
I do not know	89
Does not select an answer	6
Total	251

60 percent of the believers in Pingyang (in the developed Wenzhou area) think that modern society and the current market economy system are good for the Church. However, the percentage of those choosing “good” is only 41.8 percent in Mapeng (a Catholic village in the west of Zhejiang Province), and 35.4 percent of believers chose the fourth answer “I do not know.” This is related to the strong negative response to the enormous impact of the modern economy on Christianity in villages.

The above conclusion can be further verified by the results of Questions 20, 21 and 24. 30 percent of believers think that the modern society and economy have “a largely good effect” or “a very good effect.” 35 percent think that it has “some good effects.” Around 30 percent think they do not really have any good effects, or they have “no benefit.”

This is a very interesting question. We plan to do a further analysis of the several answers in order to assess the differences

among believers of different genders, age groups, intellectual levels and professions. We also want to know the specific content of their ideas of “good” or “not good.”

(iv) Comparatively speaking, believers are more sober-minded and objective in estimating Christianity’s position and perspectives in current Chinese society.

Question 25: “The general mood of society is not very good. People are striving for money and material benefits. What role do you think your Church will play for the development of society and the improvement of morality and prevailing practice?” The answers of Catholics in Mapeng and Pingyang County to this question are as follows:

	Pingyang	Mapeng
It has significant effect	83	11
It has some effect and contribution	235	199
It has little effect	6	25
It has no effect	1	13
Does not select an answer	10	3
Total	335	251

Obviously, most chose the first and the second answers. This is exactly the same as the surveys of Protestants in Pingyang.

Question 26: “There is a great development in the Chinese economy in the 21st century. Compared with other Churches, what do you think of your Church’s prospects?” The answers of Catholics in Pingyang and Mapeng to this question are as follows:

	Pingyang	Mapeng	Total
It will have a great development	56	29	85
It will have a certain development	219	77	296
It will meet some difficulties, and it will be difficult to develop	4	56	60
I do not know	51	86	137
Does not select an answer	5	2	7
Total	335	251	586

The above statistics show that the percentage of those who chose “it will have a great development” is 14.26 percent, and the percentage of those who chose “it will have a certain development” is 50.51 percent. The total percentage is 64.77, which means that two-thirds of believers have confidence in their Church’s development. 10.2 percent of believers think it will have difficulty developing. During our individual interviews, we learned that the reasons are: China and the Vatican have not established diplomatic relations, and the government controls the Catholic Church more tightly than the Protestant Church. Others think that some priests give out-dated homilies. Some young people think that old priests have not integrated the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. The reasons why 23.37 percent (about a quarter) of believers chose “I do not know” are the same as the reasons for those who chose the third answer “it will meet some difficulties.” They are more pessimistic. The old generation especially thinks the younger generation has changed, while the younger generation thinks that they cannot stay at home to suffer poverty, like the older generation.

According to the survey, in Pingyang the percentage of those who think their Catholic Church or Protestant Church will develop to a certain degree is very close. Protestants, however, are more optimistic. 30.24 percent think their Church will make good progress. Because of the problems of China-Vatican diplomatic relations, only 16.71 percent Catholics are optimistic. 15.22 percent of Catholics expressed their concern, and they think it is hard to be hopeful.

This is my research and analysis of the 26 questions in my questionnaire. Because of time limitations and the summer heat, which we have not had for more than 100 years, a drought and loss of power, I did not have enough time to do further work. Regarding these materials, I would like to continue to collaborate with colleagues and friends from home or abroad so that we can open up some new fields of research.