

International Relations of the Protestant Church in China since 1979

Donald E. MacInnis

The Protestant Church in China today has been described by its leaders as post-colonial and post-denominational, terms which define this former "mission church" as the most autonomous in the world today. Cut off from direct relationships with churches and mission societies outside China for nearly thirty years, the church that emerged in 1979 from thirteen years of suppression during the Cultural Revolution was completely self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating; no missionaries serve that church. There is only one post-denominational Protestant church in China today, and autonomy continues as the guiding principle in the relations of the Chinese church with its brother/sister churches and ecumenical agencies throughout the world.



The Chinese Protestant Church before 1949

The significance of this development is best understood when contrasted with the denominational patchwork of China's churches and their dependence on foreign mission societies prior to 1949. The only truly independent and self-supporting churches in China were indigenous, mainly the Little Flock (the Assemblies), the True Jesus, and the Jesus Family. These had sprung up under Chinese charismatic leaders in the early decades of the twentieth century and, by 1949, included nearly 25 percent of China's Protestant Christians.

The remaining Protestants were divided among many denominations, all linked to mission societies in the home countries. A single confession, such as the Lutheran Church, might have over a dozen separate and independent regional churches in the 1920s and 30's, each of them directly related to separate mission societies in the home countries of Europe and North America. There were over 120 Protestant foreign mission societies, with 8,325 mission-

over 120 Protestant foreign mission societies, with 8,325 missionaries, in China in 1926; in 1949, alongside 2,024 Chinese clergy, there were 4,091 missionaries, 934 of them ordained clergy.

Aside from the indigenous sects, the churches and societies could be divided into three categories: the mainline denominations (Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, etc.); the smaller, evangelical churches (such as the Assemblies of God); and the independent, non-denominational mission societies (such as the Scandinavian Alliance and the China Inland Mission.)

Only the mainline churches, and not all of them, joined the Chinese National Christian Council in 1923. Four years later, a united church, the Church of Christ in China, with about one-third of all Protestant Christians in China, was formed by the union of churches related to sixteen foreign mission societies, all of them in the Calvinist/reformed tradition--Presbyterian, Baptist or Reformed. While Chinese leaders predominated, missionaries and financial subsidies were an integral part of this united church until 1950, as was true of all the denominational churches.

The international relationships of this checkerboard of Christian denominations and sects across China had primarily a bilateral, intra-denominational linkage with their particular supporting churches in Europe and North America, for that was the source of their identity as well as mission support.

There were some ecumenical contacts abroad, particularly through international Christian agencies such as the YMCA, YWCA and the United Bible Societies. Delegates from certain Chinese denominations attended the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, where T.C. Chao, a leading theologian, was elected as one of the six presidents. Dr. Chao resigned three years later, signaling the withdrawal of Chinese Christians from all international ecumenical organizations: a policy that was reversed only in February, 1991, when the China Christian Council rejoined the World Council of Churches at its 7th General Assembly held in Canberra, Australia.

The Protestant Church in China after 1949

All this changed after the founding of new China in 1949. The Korean War (1950-53) marked the end of the missionary era; financial subsidies were cut off in 1950, and all missionaries (except a handful in prison or under house arrest) had left China by 1952. Chinese Church leaders seldom ventured abroad, and few foreign Christians were able to visit China until the 1980's. To the surprise of many, the Chinese church had not dwindled or disappeared; in fact, its numbers had multiplied without help from

more than quintupled since 1949, when 936,000 was the figure given for Protestant Church membership.¹

Three-Self: the Basic Policy on International Relations

In Point 5 of his 1980 essay, "Fourteen Points from Christians in the People's Republic of China to Christians Abroad," Bishop K.H. Ting, President of the China Christian Council, set forth the basic Three-Self principle:²

5. Our Three-self principle. We are resolved to uphold the reasonableness and justice of Three-Self for the Chinese church. On the basis of past history it is necessary for the Chinese church to follow the Three-Self road. Today, for the Chinese church to bear witness to the gospel among the Chinese people, self-government, self-support and self-propagation are also necessary. We cannot return to the old situation of representing a 'foreign religion'...

How does this policy affect the church's international relationships? Points 11 to 13 of this same essay speak to that question.

11. International Relationships

We are a small church with many responsibilities within China. We think our major efforts must be devoted to our domestic work. We wish to immerse ourselves in our work so as to push this experiment of ours forward. Then, perhaps sometime in the future, we will be able to speak of some contribution to the international Christian community. But for now, our international commitments must be limited, meaning that we must differentiate [between friends and enemies] and be selective.

12. Our participation in international organizations and conferences.

Here we must differentiate too, and, because of our limited resources, be selective. There are a number of organizations and conferences which have taken a friendly attitude towards us in which we have not been able to participate. We have also not been able to invite many friendly church groups from overseas for visits to China. We ask for our overseas friends' understanding in these matters.

13. Material or financial contributions from abroad

Ours is a very small church with limited financial re-

sources, but we are able to support ourselves. The strength of our position lies in the fact that we will not do anything beyond our ability and thus be forced to become parasitic. But because our Chinese church is now already self-supporting and independent, there is probably no longer the need to maintain a simple 'closed-door policy' on the question of receiving contributions. We are pondering over the wisdom of accepting certain contributions from friendly church groups and persons overseas, with no strings attached and with due respect for the independent stance of our church, simply as an expression of the universality of our Christian fellowship....

The Three-Self policy was reiterated in other speeches by Bishop Ting and other Chinese church leaders. Han Wenzao, associate general secretary of the China Christian Council, spoke to the ecumenical conference in Montreal, Canada in 1981. In "On International Relations of the Chinese Church," he quoted from the resolution adopted at the Third National Christian Conference (1980):³

While adhering to the principle of self-government, self-support and self-propagation, the Chinese church looks forward to friendly intercourse with Christians and churches of other lands on the principle of mutual respect, for the furtherance of fellowship in Christ. However, we are opposed to the infiltration and anti-Chinese activities of a handful of people abroad who work under the pretext of 'evangelism' to implement their scheme of hostility against New China and to split up the Chinese church. They totally ignore the jurisdiction and the Three-Self principle of the Chinese church. Their attempts are doomed to failure. We know that many Christians abroad are opposed to such attempts as much as we are.

Mr. Han went on to say:

This is our basic attitude in international relations--one of differentiation of groups according to their attitude toward us ... Meanwhile, we frequently come across such questions as, Why is the Chinese church unwilling to accept the assistance of overseas churches to facilitate the propagation of the Gospel, but instead adopts an almost closed-door policy?...

I would like to answer with all sincerity that our principle is

not one of door-closing. During the last few years, our communications with churches of other lands have been constantly increasing... We are always ready to develop our fellowship with sister churches and fellow Christians abroad who hold goodwill towards New China and a respect for the sovereignty and principles of autonomy of the Chinese church. We have never shut the door of mutual help between us. However, it is the conviction of the Chinese church that our growth will depend mainly on the guidance of God, the service and offering of the Chinese Christians...

May I repeat [in closing] that, though the Chinese church is small and has to concentrate its main efforts on the rebuilding of the Chinese church on the domestic scene, we look forward to a growing scale of intercourse with Christian brethren in other lands who take a friendly attitude to our principled stand.

Ecumenical Sharing: Nanjing '86

Bishop Ting, speaking to 144 delegates from 22 countries at the ecumenical conference, "Ecumenical Sharing: a New Agenda" in Nanjing in 1986, reiterated the Three-Self principle, while extending the right hand of fellowship to Christians everywhere:⁴

Since the beginning of the Three-Self movement, the meaning we have been giving to self-support is that the financial maintenance of the personnel and the work of evangelism, nurture and the building up of the body of Christ is to be the responsibility of Christians in China ourselves and not to rely on missionary funds from abroad ... Self-support is not so much a rejection of inter-church sharing of resources as a principle we choose to adhere to, recognizing it as a most important precondition for the church in China to become Chinese. It is only a church possessing a selfhood of its own that can truly play its part in the give and take of inter-church sharing.

Bishop Ting went on to explain that gifts given to Chinese churches in "genuine, disinterested love" by individual friends from abroad would be just as welcome as offerings given to the church by its own Chinese members. At the same time, Chinese Christians would not refrain from giving to churches abroad when they saw a need, without infringing on the selfhood and integrity of those churches.

Bishop Ting (like many visitors to the Chinese church) sees the Three-self policy of the Chinese church as "an experiment on the part of Chinese Christians on behalf of the Church Universal. If it succeeds it can certainly not bring harm to Christians elsewhere, but can mean their enrichment..."

For the Chinese church, because of its Three-Self policy, the question most hotly debated at the Nanjing conference--how to achieve just and equitable sharing of the resources of the wealthier First World churches with those of the developing nations--was irrelevant; the Chinese church is not asking for a share.

International Exchanges after 1979

Although bilateral denominational relationships have never been resumed (because denominational distinctions no longer exist in China), Christian delegations from China have visited many countries since December, 1978, when the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee lifted the ban on religious activities.

The first of those was the Third World Conference on Religion and Peace, held at Princeton University in August, 1979. A delegation of ten religious leaders from China--Buddhists, Muslims and Christians--attended the two-week conference. Subsequently, Protestant delegations have visited the churches of many countries (as, indeed, have Catholics, Muslims and Buddhists visited their own co-religionists abroad).

Delegations from many of these countries have made reciprocal visits to China, generating mutual friendship and understanding. However, aside from the Amity Foundation and other indirectly church-related projects, no church-to-church programs have been established.

International Aid for Social Service Projects

Although no missionaries directly serve the Chinese church, the Amity Foundation was formed in 1985 on the initiative of Chinese Christian leaders as a means of serving educational, health and welfare work, and many friends from churches in the West have been serving in college teaching jobs arranged by Amity staff. The Amity Board of Directors includes both Christians and non-Christians; it is entirely a Chinese organization, and it welcomes contributions of personnel and money from abroad for projects such as aid to the mentally and physically handicapped. For the first time, foreign Christian churches and agencies have been invited to cooperate with Chinese Christians in a major program.

Since its founding in 1985, Amity Foundation projects have multiplied, springing up in several provinces, tangibly witnessing to the social concerns of the Christian churches in China and abroad. However, its spokesmen make clear its separate identity from the Christian church: ⁵

As a non-governmental and non-church organization, Amity represents a new form of Christian involvement in Chinese society. There are at least two distinctive features of such newness. First, the initiative for the Amity Foundation came from within China; all projects are identified, designed, studied and evaluated in consultation with Chinese specialists according to local needs and conditions. Second, Amity represents a form of cooperation between Christians and non-Christians, including Chinese Communists, to work together for the good of the people. By making contributions to the humanitarian welfare of the Chinese people without religious discrimination, the Amity Foundation also makes Christian involvement and participation in China's social development more widely known to the Chinese people and to people the world over.

The Amity Printing Press

One exception to Amity's separation from the church is its joint venture, incorporated according to the laws of the People's Republic of China, with the United Bible Societies (a worldwide union of national Bible societies) to jointly operate the Amity Printing Press in Nanjing. While this ultra-modern press, established with generous grants from the UBS, is designed to execute printing jobs from any secular customer, its main work since its opening in late 1987 has been the printing of Chinese Bibles and other literature for the Chinese church. The Amity Press's two-millionth Chinese Bible was printed, bound and shipped to a regional Bible depot in August, 1990.

Conclusion

Since the normalization of China's international relations, China's Christians have been able once again to welcome friends from abroad and to travel abroad themselves. As with all Chinese citizens, however, there are conditions and restrictions on receiving passports and exit permits. For example, a group of Chinese seminarians, invited by theological seminaries in the West for graduate study in the current academic year, have been refused passports and

exit permits by their government. We must assume this is a temporary holdup as other seminarians have been allowed to study abroad in recent years, and other Chinese graduate students have been allowed to accept scholarship opportunities abroad this year.

But on the whole, the Chinese Protestant Christians, primarily through their leaders in the China Christian Council, continue to carry on normal, if limited, relationships with their friends abroad, accepting almost no direct church-to-church financial aid, but sharing the lessons of their experience of running the church on a policy of Three-Self autonomy--"an experiment on the part of Chinese Christians on behalf of the Church Universal."

Notes

1. *D. MacInnis, Religion in China Today: Policy & Practice. Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1989. p. 313.*
2. *Chu and Lind, A New Beginning: an International Dialogue with the Chinese Church. Toronto, Canada China Programme, 1983. p. 108.*
3. *ibid., page 104.*
4. *Nanjing '86: Ecumenical Sharing, an Ecumenical Conference. New York, China Program, National Council of Churches in the USA, 1986. p. 75*
5. *Bob Whyte, Unfinished Encounter, China and Christianity. London, Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1988. p. 420.*



*Blessed are the peace makers,
for they shall be called sons of God*