

China and the Church in a Time of Transition

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We read and hear a great deal about how China is in a time of transition. Over the last century, there have been countless essays, articles and talks on more or less the same theme, viewed at different times from different vantage points. It would be an interesting exercise to compare what is being written today, with viewpoints from earlier years and different turning points, say 1911, 1927, 1949, or 1966.



At the very least, this would provide us with a sense of historical perspective. It would also, I have no doubt, be a good exercise in humility.

Today, I would like to take up the same theme. I will speak of China in transition on three different levels: the transition in leadership, from the older to the younger generation; the transition in social structure, from a centralized bureaucratic system to a decentralized and diffuse social order, and the transition in cultural values, from a collective and community oriented ethic to a more individualistic, more pluralistic and less easily defined cultural system.

Leadership and generational transition

The most common way of approaching China in a time of transition is to speak of the problem of leadership and succession, the transition from an older to a younger generation of leadership. The most frequent question I am asked about China is: 'What will happen after Deng Xiaoping dies?' I am not

going to get into the various ways in which I deal with this question--that would take all of the time which is allotted to me for this talk, but I do want to say that the problem is not only one of succession for the current leadership; it is more deeply a problem for the Chinese social order culture and for the cultural tradition. At other times in this century, people have been asking what would happen when the Empress Dowager or Sun Yat-sen or Mao Zedong died.

The problem of transition from an older to a younger generation of leadership is also a problem for the church. Since 1979, we have been hearing about the fact that there are too many sheep and not enough shepherds; that the age gap in church leadership will get worse before it gets better (and we already have evidence for this); and that the Chinese Church is in a period where "the new crop is not ready, and the old one is almost gone." Bishop Shen Yifan's untimely death this past summer focused attention on the problem of succession, a problem which has now assumed critical proportions. We are fast approaching the end of an era which has been dominated by the same leaders for the last fifty years, and it is very unclear what the future holds.

In fact, the problem of leadership transition is much more serious in the church than it is in society as a whole, and it is definitely more serious for Catholics than it is for Protestants. Many government bureaus, universities, and work units have already made the transition to a younger generation of leadership, but the church is still trying to understand how to deal with the problem. Far too few younger leaders have been identified in the church, and the gap is between a generation now in their seventies, and younger men and women in thirties and forties.

The major reason for this age gap is that there was no real leadership training among Christians for at least twenty years (1960-1980), and during much of that time, most people assumed that the church would die out. The church is still not a good career for men and women of talent. There are also various cultural factors involved in the leadership crisis--traditional patriarchy and respect for the elderly - and these are undergirded by the theological conservatism and fundamentalism of Chinese Christians. (Some observers have noted that government officials are more comfortable with older church leaders than they are with younger ones. This may be true in some

places, but there are cadres who see the urgency of promoting new leadership and have encouraged an often reluctant church hierarchy to move more quickly).

Despite these problems, a new church leadership is definitely emerging. The older generation of (national) leaders are better educated, more familiar with the outside world, more involved in society, and with more defined roles in the current social order. The younger generation grew up during the Cultural Revolution era. They are, for the most part, not university graduates; they have less church, social and overseas experience; and they are not so much in tune with contemporary intellectual and social currents as their peers outside the church. With some outstanding exceptions, these younger church leaders have a fairly narrow theological perspective. But at the same time, they are open to new ideas, more democratic, less burdened by the struggles of the past, and ready to assume new positions of responsibility.

For both church and society, the shift to a new generation of leadership means a transition from a charismatic or traditional leadership to a generation which is, at least potentially, more open and responsive to change. Second and third tier government leaders are often technocrats, career officials with well cultivated leadership skills and technical expertise.

We do not have this kind of Christian leadership. Rather, we see in the church younger men and women in their 30s and 40s who have been cultivated and nurtured over the last ten years, and who have learned to co-operate effectively with the present church leadership. It is assumed that they will become the chosen successors of the present generation. This is a diverse group which is not always in agreement either with one another or with their elders, and they face a situation which requires pastoral, priestly and prophetic leadership which may not be fully developed. And in addition to these "chosen successors", there are also more charismatic, entrepreneurial and opportunistic Christian leaders in China. They are often associated with more independent Christian communities and traditions, and they would lead the church in different directions.

It has never been easy, in China or any place else, for one generation to choose its own successors. In many places in China today, there is growing conflict between the older and the younger generations. We have seen such conflict in reports on

Shenyang and the Gangwashi Church in Beijing. But this is only the tip of the iceberg, for there are reports of similar incidents in many other places. One can counsel older leaders to be more understanding and younger leaders to be more patient, but this does not solve the problem. In the end, the future belongs to the young and they are most in need of our prayers and support. (It is reported that almost two-thirds of the whole Chinese population is under 30.) The older generation will need to realize that it must leave some things undone.¹

In this context, let me make a plea for the maintenance of the historic episcopacy in Chinese Protestantism. I think this should also be a subject for our prayers. Although there is not much support for the episcopacy at the grassroots, I believe it would be deleterious for the church to lose this tradition in its post-denominational period. I agree with what Bishop Jonas Johnson said at Bishop Shen Yifan's Memorial Service, that "an episcopal tradition must not be lost to the Chinese Church at a time when it is being strengthened and renewed in our churches around the world". The episcopacy would help provide the (Protestant) church in China with the continuity, the liturgical practice and the sense of churchmanship it needs for the renewal of its faith and order. It would also serve as a counterpoint to an overly independent and entrepreneurial style of church leadership.

Transition from a centralized bureaucratic political and economic system to a decentralized and diffused social order

More basic than the leadership question is China's transition from a centralized bureaucratic political and economic system to a more decentralized and diffused social order. Economic restructuring and the use of market mechanisms have been the basis for the shift towards a socialist market economy and the policies of openness and reform. For more than forty years, the Communist Party has enjoyed both the ideological and an organizational monopoly in Chinese society, but this is now changing not only in economic life, but in the social and political realm as well. Although the Party and the State may intend to maintain full control over the process of reform and restructuring, they will no longer be able to do so as new organizations develop the

economic resources to guarantee that they have a say in the social process. We already see this in the case of corporations and businesses, especially in eastern China, and we are beginning to see emerging new centers of influence in other areas as well.

Professor Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University recently wrote:

As the state's role in the economy diminishes, symbolic resources--a sort of social and cultural capital--are being generated by nongovernmental (but not necessarily private) structures such as clan associations, religious organizations and secret societies...The retreat of the state from active involvement or by forced retirement, opens up an ever extending space for civil society.²

Although the contrast between state and civil society will not be as clearly defined in China as it is in the West, it is clear that cultural space is opening up for the non-state sector in China. That part of this sector which most concerns us is the church, but here again, the church seems to be lagging behind the rest of society in the creation of structures and institutions. Moreover, as the rest of society becomes increasingly decentralized, the problem of church unity becomes an increasingly pressing issue, as provinces and municipalities, on the one hand, and denominational and sectarian divisions on the other, separate themselves from a coherent center.

One of the things which we from churches in the West find attractive about the church in China is its spontaneous, flexible, diffuse and de-institutionalized nature. Where our own churches so often seem to be over institutionalized and top heavy, we find, at least superficially, a spirit of openness and liveliness in Chinese worshiping communities. Many of us have argued in other contexts of the advantages of a more diffuse ecclesiology in the Chinese cultural context.³

What is lacking in China, however, is an ecclesiological framework which can link Christians together both vertically and horizontally. Unless one wishes to affirm the priority of a congregationalist church order, this presents serious problems for the Chinese Church.

First and foremost is that in the absence of such a structure, the government's much more effectively organized Religious

Affairs Bureau (RAB) can impose a church structure of its own. Some church leaders have even criticized this phenomenon, which has become worse over the last few years, as a "cadre run" system of church governance. The government's Document #6 speaks of the need to strengthen control over religious bodies and this is precisely what is being done in many areas of church life, despite the criticisms voiced by Christians leaders. Although the general climate has been improving over the last few years, so has this strengthening of control. It is therefore more likely that local and provincial church bodies will follow the government system of religious affairs which are set up in their areas than they will follow the lead of high level Christian bodies.

This problem also accentuates tensions associated with regionalization and denominationalism. The former is characteristic of all forms of economic and social life in China today, but the latter is distinct for the church. As the "cultural capital" of the churches expands, there are more forms of Christianity which are put "on the market". Some of these come from overseas, but others are home grown. At the same time, older denominational and sectarian divisions have resurfaced. There is ample evidence for this in popular reporting about China, among both Protestant and Catholic communities.

It is unfortunate, in this connection, that Chinese Protestant plans for the creation of a "Christian Church of China", first suggested in the 1980s, have not been able to materialize. The "Church Order for Trial Use in Chinese Churches" (1991) is a step towards greater clarity in terms of ecclesiology, but it is still in its trial stage. It should be remembered that the China Christian Council is somewhere between a Council of Churches and a national Church. As such, ecclesiology remains an important area of concern for the future. How can the CCC become a stronger institutional expression of the Body of Christ? How should national, provincial and local Christian communities be related ecclesologically? What is the role of the laity and different orders of ministry in the life and witness of the Chinese Church? To what extent should the sacraments and liturgical practice assume a greater role in the worship of the Church? Can space be created for ecumenical discussions with Chinese Catholics? These are important theological questions for the future, and we can do no more than raise them here.

Transition in cultural values

The third and most basic form of transition which China is experiencing is in the area of cultural values, from a collective and community oriented ethic to a more individualistic, more pluralistic and less easily defined cultural system. This is part of the shift from a self-reliant and more closed society, to a more open and pluralistic one. But whereas it is possible to at least envision what a new generation of leadership and new social structures will look like for the nation as a whole, it is not possible to do this in the area of culture.

For China today is experiencing a crisis of values. This has been described as an erosion of the moral fabric of society, and a multifaceted sense of loss: loss of faith in socialism, loss of a traditional sense of shame, loss of the "glue" which holds the society together, loss of cultural confidence, even loss of "soul". You may think that I am exaggerating, but all of these are terms which Chinese intellectuals, and even some government officials, have used to describe China's crisis in values.⁴ Behind this lies a deep sense of alienation from the political center, which is, in turn accompanied by competition among a variety of symbolic and spiritual resources, from *qigong* to fortune telling, from Confucianism to Christianity.

The church may lag behind the rest of society in questions of leadership formation and degree of institutionalization, but Christianity has a great deal to offer in terms of the reformation of faith and values. Bishop K.H. Ting is among those who have said that Chinese culture is more open to Christianity today than it has ever been in the course of its thousand years' encounter. This interest in Christianity is experienced at a variety of levels, among peasants in the countryside, and intellectuals in the cities; among young people excited by China's opening to the world, and older retirees reflecting on the meaning of life; among women of all ages, and minorities from southwest to northeast China. Here, I would especially like to say a few words about the intellectuals because I believe that the dialogue on Christianity and culture with Chinese intellectuals is an essential ingredient for the inculturation of Christianity in China.

Recently, the Amity Foundation and the Academy of Social Sciences co-hosted an international consultation on "Christianity and Modernization" in Beijing. The topic is related to the

ongoing search for human values and "spiritual civilization" which can give meaning to life and hold the country together, especially among younger and middle age intellectuals. In our consultation, a number of papers by Chinese participants dealt with love, friendship and transcendence as important cultural contributions from the Bible and the Christian tradition. Some papers also focused on the contemporary Chinese Church, and the interest which many young people have in Christianity. Chinese Christian participants spoke of the challenge which modernization poses to a church with a poorly educated laity, an inadequate number of pastors and an underdeveloped theology. In contrast, many of the papers from overseas participants raised questions about modernization and modernity, especially about the ways in which ideologies of modernization (and its economic counterpart, the globalization of market economy) undercut both Christian and human values. I don't need to go into all of this here, except to say that such gatherings represent an important contribution to the process of inculturation.

Shortly after this conference I spoke about inculturation with a Christian intellectual from Beijing who has been lecturing and doing research in Hong Kong. His comment was provocative: "We must not make the mistake," he said, "of making the process of contextualization or inculturation into the goal of what we are looking for. If we do this, we become prisoners of our culture, and we lose the inspiring and universal dimension of faith. We are interested in Christianity because its emphasis on love and faith and sin and transcendence draws no artificial boundaries between peoples and classes and cultures." Speaking against what he sees as an oppressive cultural and political tradition resistant to change, his point was that what is powerful about Christianity is its universality, and this universality or catholicity is what we share as human beings. Moreover, it is this Christian vision which can help to re-form a society which has been literally torn apart in the struggles of the last century or more.

What Chinese intellectuals have found in Christianity is a new way of putting their world together based on something very close to a classical understanding of Christian faith. They are more interested in the formative and the constructive vision of Christianity, than in its prophetic and political function. They are therefore more apt to stress the cultural rather than the

social expression of a Christianity which offers a moral vision open to all. We may find fault with the Chinese intellectuals' articulation of this vision--it seems very much like a recasting of 19th century liberalism, for example--but it provides us with an entry point for a broader dialogue on questions of importance on our common future. It is inspiring to me that both Chinese peasants and Chinese intellectuals have rediscovered something in the formative and the transformative power of Christian faith which has often been forgotten in the churches in the West.

This partly has to do with the difference between modernizing and post-modern societies, but it also has to do with our approach to Christianity as a critical and constructive resource for our societies. In the West, we need to pay more attention to the formative and constructive power of Christian faith, and not only to its prophetic or critical power. Max Stackhouse has suggested that now is the time for ecumenical Protestants to rediscover the "form" of our Reformation which is at the heart of the Christian gospel.⁵ We need to move beyond the "protest", beyond the deconstruction which tears down, and puts nothing in its place. I want to suggest that this would draw us closer not only to what Chinese intellectuals are searching for, but also to the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical traditions.

In our dialogue, just as we can rediscover dimensions of the Christian tradition which we have overlooked, so we can introduce aspects of Christian faith from our own cultures which Chinese intellectuals may be missing. Of course, this mutual rediscovery is what ecumenical, inter-church and inter-cultural dialogue are all about. And it is central to the process of inculturation. Nicholas Standaert has described inculturation as:

...the incarnation of evangelical life and message in and through members of a particular culture, in such a way that Christian experience is expressed not only in terms of that culture (that would be simple adaption), but so that it becomes a force that inspires culture, gives direction and effects renewal, thus giving rise to a new reality not only in a particular culture but enriching the universal church.⁶

This is what is happening to Christianity in the search for new cultural values in Chinese society, and this search can enrich all of us as part of the universal church.

Canon David M. Paton, whose vision inspired the formation

of the Friends of the Church of China, once said that the reason he could continue to write and reflect and comment on the church in China was that he never stopped feeling that he was a part of it. I think that these same thoughts apply to all of us who have gathered here. For our dialogue with China around the question of Christianity at so many different levels helps us to see that we are all part of a broader and more universal Church than any of us could have imagined on our own.

Notes

1. See Zhang Xianyong, "Some Things Left Undone," *Chinese Theological Review: 1991*, pp. 158-164.
2. Tu Wei-ming, "Introduction: Cultural Perspectives," *Daedalus* (special issue on *China in Transformation*), 122:2 (Spring, 1993), p. xiv.
3. See my review article, "Understanding the Church in China," *China Study Journal*, 9:2 (August, 1994), pp. 11-16.
4. See, for example, Tongqi Lin, "A Search for China's Soul," *Daedalus* (*China in Transformation*, 122:2 (Spring, 1993), pp. 171-188.
5. Stackhouse, Max, "Responsible Society," *One World* (October, 1994), p. 16.
6. Standaert, Nicholas, "The Fascinating God: A Challenge for Modern Theology Raised by a Text on the Name of God Written by a 17th Century Chinese Student of Theology." Licentiate in Sacred Theology Dissertation, Faculty of Theology, Fujen University, 1994, p. 2.