China's Underground Movements: Meaning and Resolution

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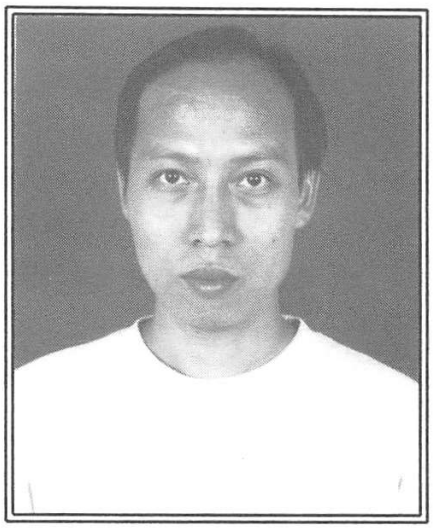

Three conditions must be present for an underground phenomenon to take effect. Firstly, the government must forbid its existence; secondly, it must be organized and active within a given society; and thirdly, its structure must run parallel to the one that has authorized government approval.

An underground phenomenon, forbidden by the top levels of government, can claim no legal status within society. However, to recognize its illegality does not mean it does not have the moral right to exist. A distinction must be made between what is moral and what is legal.

Members of society must perceive an underground phenomenon as a reality, with activities that make themselves felt. Opposition to an underground phenomenon is, then, real opposition to something that is real and well defined, not something that only exists in theory or in the abstract.

At a conference I attended a few years ago, a young man raised an objection to my third condition, i.e. that there must already be a parallel structure in the open society: "Is robbery," he asked, "to be viewed, then, as an underground phenomenon?" Returning banter for banter, I replied: "Only if the government approves and sees its way to legalizing it." Robbery is not only illegal; it is also immoral. The underground phenomenon may be illegal, but in its structures and activities it relies upon many legal entities that provide the basis for its very existence.

Underground movements existed in China before 1979, but after that year, they suddenly emerged as well organized social

entities. Using the above three criteria as guidelines, we can say that before 1979, these groups could not be categorized as underground phenomena in the strict sense. Taking the economy as an example: before 1979, there was neither the desire nor the need for an underground foreign exchange market. However, after 1979, the economic need and opportunity brought into being a highly organized black market dealing in foreign currencies. Not even strong government pressure could prevent or control its growth and progress. Thus the black market emerged as an underground phenomenon: forbidden by law, but active in society, and running parallel to the government's own foreign currency exchange.

In a similar vein, although there was much dissatisfaction among Catholics with the government's religious policy prior to 1979, (opposition had already begun to intensify in the early 1950's), it was not until the beginning of the 1980's that these movements were organized and activated to run counter to official government structures. In my opinion, the date of the establishment of the underground church within the Catholic Church in China must be deferred to the end of the 1970's when it quietly but effectively made its presence felt in society.

Some like to call the Catholic Church of the 1950's an underground phenomenon. However, in reality, the church of those days was an open church. While it may be argued that church leaders were often at odds with government policies and sometimes with each other, the church structure itself had government recognition. The aim of the government was to replace its leaders with those who were more 'reliable' and 'sympathetic' to government goals. By the end of the 1950's, the Church in China was almost totally under government authority. Large numbers of those who openly opposed government interference were sent to prison. At the time, many Catholics found it difficult to define who they were relative to the official church. It is certain, however, that no alternative structure existed in open opposition to it. In my view the underground church, as an organized parallel structure as we know it today, came to the fore only after the 1970's.

An Underground Society Predates the Underground Church

The year 1979 was a watershed year for underground phenomena within Chinese society. Just a short listing of active movements will serve to show how prolific and widespread this phenomenon became. First, there emerged a political underground when the so-called "Democracy Wall" was set up in the Xidan District of Beijing. This was immediately followed by Wei Jingshen's "Fifth Modernization" movement, which attracted many followers who agitated for the modernization of government through radical political reforms. Then there was the rise of an underground economy, funded by the black market in foreign currencies and swept along by the "unofficial" commodities market. At this time also, the writers and artists came out from hiding, and in the spirit of "Let 100 flowers bloom", began a new literary movement openly. The "literature of sorrow", as it was named, was highly critical of the reigning social structures of society. The works sold briskly at bookstalls throughout the cities of China, but without official government approbation. There was even a music underground, where "rock and roll" was the featured entertainment at all the "unofficial" gathering spots. Almost every day another "underground" group appeared on the scene. Such groups and movements covered the whole spectrum of society and provided the soil for the underground church to grow and develop.

Each underground phenomenon had its own particular *raison d'être.* In the case of the underground church it was an official document from the Holy See, issued by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and promulgated in 1978. The Instruction, entitled: "Relaxation of the Church's Jurisdiction", gave special powers and privileges to priests and Catholics living in China. It also provided the legal basis for the rise of the underground church[1]. It provided the Catholic Church, which always prided itself on its closed and comprehensive legal system, with space to accommodate and integrate another legal framework into its own.

In point of fact, all that this document was really able to do at the time was to eliminate certain obstacles along the path that would eventually allow for the emergence of the underground church within

the framework of the Chinese Catholic Church. However, while admitting its role as a facilitator, it was not this document but the change in the social system that really brought the underground church into existence. One only need look at our Protestant brethren, who were certainly not bound by Catholic Canon Law, but maintained a system of "house churches" alongside of the official "Three-selfs Movement Christian Church."[2] Obviously, the emergence of the "underground church" phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to church legislation.

We must not, however, dismiss nor forget the important contributions made to the underground church movement by such notables as Bishop Fan Xueyan of the Baoding Diocese and Bishop Zhou Weidao of Feng Xiang and many others. Yet their involvement arose more as a response to events taking place at the moment rather than by personal design. In the eyes of historians, many would see the notion of historical necessity as the source for the rise of such leaders. Had Bishop Fan not risen to the occasion, another "Bishop Fan" would have stepped forward to assume leadership over the underground church at that time.[3]

The Underground Phenomenon as a Mirror of Society

The formation of an underground in a society undergoing rapid change depends on two factors: (1) the social systems that originate at the upper levels are not able to satisfy the demands of those on the lower levels of society; and (2) the pressures exerted by the top consistently fail in their efforts to suppress these demands. The corollary is simple: the appearance of an underground becomes a social necessity.[4]

I prefer to call those movements that arise outside the parameters of what is officially permitted by the government "underground phenomena" rather than "underground social systems". The former are not independent of the latter but rely upon and make use of social systems that are stable and structurally the same as those given legal status and approved by the government. As noted above, I view the "official" and the "unofficial" structures as two sides of the same coin. Taking my example from the nation's economy once again,

it is easy to see that while the rate of exchange may differ between the official and the black market, both are using the same money. If the illegal system did not mirror the legal one, it could not continue to operate.

Underground phenomena originate from the needs of the members at the lower levels of society that are not met by the official structures. During periods of tightening, the government controls or represses these demands. Nothing more is heard from the dissatisfied group. They have not disappeared; however, they are merely dormant. When the government relaxes controls and eases the forces of suppression somewhat, the lower levels of society rise up once again to take matters into their own hands. They take independent action to have their demands addressed with even greater force than before. This is the time when the underground phenomenon will make its presence known.

The Underground Supports the Open System Indirectly

To the question, "Is the underground church harmful to the official church?" I would reply that: the very appearance of an underground body within the Catholic Church does indicate that the open system has not yet met the valid demands or satisfied the felt needs of a large number of Catholics. Its very existence may be an embarrassment to the open church, but from another point of view, the emergence of the underground also serves to strengthen the hand of the open church when it has to deal directly with the leadership of the top levels of society. The open church can and does represent all Catholics, even members of the underground. It is also the existence of the underground that gives the official church more room to manoeuvre in its dealings with government officials. Take the issue of church music as an example. When modern liturgical music swept through the underground church, the official church was still stuck in the past, and by law, could only offer the same old traditional pre-Vatican II styles. Faced with the ever-growing popularity of the underground church liturgies, the government was compelled to grant its approval to the open church's request for greater freedom in liturgical matters. In this and other related matters the government had

no other choice but to allow the official church more space in which to develop. Through this we can see that the underground and the open church, while often bickering in public, may also, at times, be able to complement each other.

As remarkable as it might seem, the open church can, and often does, obtain concessions from the government because of the existence of the underground church, and this is true not only of Catholic but also of Protestant churches. A clear example of this can be found in *Document Three*, a policy paper issued by the United Front in December 1988. *Document Three* stated that underground churches were on the increase and called for prompt adjustments to be made by the official churches to offset their growing strength and influence. Reinforcement of the structures of the Chinese Catholic Church's Bishop Conference followed as a direct result from this change in policy, and this opening led also to other innovations and modifications at its annual meeting in 1992.[5]

The government has always recognized approved social systems and their underground counterparts as two sides of the same coin. In a discussion on the subject of the open and underground churches of China, the Franciscan historian Arnulf Camps compared it to the Chinese Rites Controversy of 300 years ago. He saw the present situation as posing a definite threat to the very existence of the church there. However, I do not agree with this view. In my view, the Chinese Rites Controversy was a duel to the death between two stubborn and uncompromising parties. The present dispute within the Chinese Catholic Church can, and might very well lead not to division but to a resolution wherein both sides can emerge victorious. Statistics tend to support this view. In 1979, the open church really had nothing by way of physical resources, growing membership or social influence. By 1996, however, it had grown into a sizable institution, numbering several thousand churches, over 1,000 seminarians preparing for ordination, and had a dramatic increase in the number of priests and religious sisters serving an ever-growing Catholic population. This kind of growth and vitality was also to be found in the underground church. Statistics are hard to come by for the underground church, but we know that their bishops increased, during this time, from zero to over 60 by 1996.[6]

Obviously, the existence of both bodies has resulted in a rivalry that has had both good and bad effects on the church as a whole. Since the negative aspects have been discussed at great length elsewhere,[7] I prefer to try to throw some light on the positive side.

Both bodies are, necessarily, in a relationship characterized by mutual dependency. The challenge provided by the underground becomes, in fact, an occasion for the open church to advocate for rights and privileges from the government. On the other hand, the open church offers a structure of protection, whereby the underground can continue to operate relatively uninhibited within society. Without this umbrella, it is a question of how long the underground church could continue to survive?

The Underground and Social Liberalization

The presence of an underground does not in itself lead to further curtailment of freedoms within society. The fact that the underground does challenge officially approved structures, does not, in itself, affect the degree of liberalization already granted to the lower level of society. Contrary to the opinions voiced by many foreign observers, conflicts in China do not necessarily mean a diminution of liberalization already extended by government authority. On the contrary, it might well lead to a further increase of liberalization as a pragmatic response to existing problems.

The process of liberalization is always relative. There are many ups and downs along the road to liberty and freedom. An increase in religious liberalization leads to an increase of religious activities, which then results in even greater liberalization for religion. Each new breakthrough generates higher expectations, and also greater dissatisfaction with existing limitations. New conflicts then emerge. These are met by fresh responses, responses that are both positive and negative. But the process continues; it does not remain static for long.[8]

Conflict is not necessarily bad. During the Cultural Revolution, to enter into open conflict with the government was not tolerated. But after the Cultural Revolution, when religious suppression was relaxed, conflicts came out into the open, especially in the area of southern and central Hebei, in the dioceses of Baoding, Yixian and Anguo. These conflicts underlined the contradiction that exists between "concrete limitations" (by the government) and the

"unwillingness to accept limitations" (by the underground church). This kind of contradiction will continue to produce an interplay between contending forces until, in the long term, a balance is finally achieved that will be seen as acceptable to both sides.

When China instituted its open policy in 1979, the monetary system was in a state of constant flux. This was primarily due to the rivalry between the open and the black markets. The fate of the renminbi was, in effect, taken out of the government's hands. Finally, the government acted in 1994 to regain control and bring stability to the situation by merging both monetary systems into one. This proved a successful resolution to the problem. What the government had really done was allow private elements in society to enjoy a "partial opening" into the international market by setting up a new and improved foreign exchange system. This, in effect, made currency exchanges in the black market redundant, and it put an end to the rivalry between the official exchange and the black market exchange rates.

The Underground and the Government

The appearance of underground phenomena does create a number of difficulties for the government's judiciary and for officials charged with national security. Because they operate beyond the pale of the government's authority, they serve to weaken government control.[9] The government does not welcome underground movements, nor does it relish having to deal with them, but the premise that their effect on society is totally negative bears further and more careful scrutiny.

Underground phenomena often cause delay in the implementation of ordinary government policy, and their open hostility lessens, to some degree, the level of social acceptance that it has previously enjoyed. The world of Chinese literature and art can serve as an example. The government went all out to promote their officially approved "rustic school" of writing. Writers such as Liu Shaotan and others received its full support. At the same time, it held in disdain the "literature of sorrow" school. But its own new policy of openness to the outside world caused a modest breach in the wall that allowed unapproved authors a limited voice both at home and abroad. After its success abroad, the "literature of sorrow" school returned

home and quietly made its way to every province in China. It created such a strong network for a new literary underground movement that it brought about the gradual demise of the "rustic" school.[10]

It is important to note that while the underground phenomena always appears as a reaction to the flaws in the government's officially approved systems, they never target the government officials themselves. (Except, of course, when the underground has as its object to overthrow the government itself.) The editor of the *Guangqi Press* in Shanghai, Shen Baoyi, has rightly commented: "Seeing things in this light, the division in the Church would be viewed solely as a matter of politics, i.e. a simple division between two groups: patriotic Catholics in favour of the government versus unpatriotic Catholics who are not. According to this logic, the all powerful Chinese government should have been able to resolve this question after so many efforts to do so in the past." [11]

Underground phenomena are also a way of releasing tension within society, and can be a stimulus to its legal systems to deal with those areas of conflict that often escape their immediate attention. More important, the underground can offer the judiciary an unofficial testing ground that exists outside the scope of official authority. It need not provide its own resources nor shoulder any special responsibility, and yet it can be an effective means for easing social tensions and resolving the problems it wishes to resolve. If the government can tolerate the underground phenomena, it can, in the short term, bring them under its influence and increase the possibilities for facilitating the implementation of its official policies. In the long run it can withdraw at any time from the relationship without doing violence to its own officially established structures. Take the Catholic Church as a case in point. While the government has continually restricted the activities of the underground bishops as a matter of general policy, it has also, in recent years, made overtures to these bishops to come out from the underground and exercise their ministry in the public domain. In doing so the government, without any cost to itself, can respond to the demands of its citizens, and at the same, if things do not proceed judiciously and according to plan, it can step back and remain aloof from any negative results.

In my opinion, government officials generally espouse a wait-and-see attitude towards the underground phenomena. If this were not

so, how could they manage to have proliferated to the degree they have during these past two decades? Their present strength is, to a considerable degree, a result of government toleration.

Solving the Problem

While underground phenomena may seem transitory by their very nature, an understanding of the reasons why they exist at all is vital to the resolution of the problems they represent.

There are three ways by which the top levels of government can respond to the underground phenomena: grant them freedom, suppress them, or let them be.

To grant them freedom, the government would be committing itself to satisfying the desires of those members of society, which gave them existence in the first place. If the officially approved structures set up by the government on the higher levels of society can be changed to meet the expressed needs of the people on the lower levels, then the problem of the underground would solve itself. Its reason for being would vanish. The example I gave at the beginning of this article of how the government dealt with black market currency exchanges serves to illustrate this point quite clearly.

The second method demands that the government apply constant pressure and constraint on the lower levels of society to the point that their needs are no longer given room for expression. This was the way the government reacted to those who posted demands for reform in large characters on the democracy wall in Beijing's Xidan district a few years ago. It not only imprisoned their leader, Wei Jingsheng, but also tore down the posters. In so doing it quashed the freedom which the people had previously enjoyed to air their views in public.[12] This strategy may have met with short-term success, but only at great cost to itself and the people in the long run. A policy of oppression only builds up more pressure that sooner or later must explode, as happened in the June 4 Incident of 1989. And it must also be said that a policy of oppression becomes less and less operable in a society that is moving steadily along the path of social progress and more openness.

The third way to deal with an underground phenomenon is to ignore it, to act as if nothing is happening, to let it be. The advantage of this approach is that the government need take no risks, nor does it

have to modify its structures in any way. This enables it to deal with the underground without threat or pressure, which lessens the danger of building up social unrest. The government used this method in dealing with the underground literary phenomenon. There is, however, a glaring weakness in this approach. If in the long run the discrepancy between official government policy and social realities is allowed to widen, the government's leadership role will be compromised and its prestige lessened. The atmosphere of ambivalence thus created will spread to many other areas of government activity. What harm this can cause to the commonweal can be seen from the different ways the government handled the currency exchange problem and the underground literary problem. In the former, the government gave its approval to the underground economy and allowed it to develop freely, thereby preserving the integrity of the national economy. But in the case of the literary underground where it adopted a hands-off policy, it not only failed to come to terms with the problem, but the problem in the end turned on it and inflicted a mortal blow to its own official literature.

A certain amount of ambivalence in dealing with civil society is not necessarily a bad thing. Its positive or negative effects on people depend, to a great extent, upon its citizens' level of civic consciousness.

Top level Chinese officials have used a mixture of all three methods in dealing with the Catholic Church. In some instances they have allowed more freedom, in others added more restrictions and increased oppression, and sometimes, when it seems appropriate to its own ends, the government adopts a hands-off, let-it-be policy. The overall purpose to this "carrot and stick" strategy is to effect a reorganization of the whole, in which the underground will merge with the open church. However, this is merely begging the question, for if the underlying problem of unsatisfied needs is not addressed, the underground phenomena will only resurface in a different guise.

Conclusion

While the coexistence of both the underground phenomena and the above ground public structures is hardly an ideal form for social management, it may be the best possible situation for a country that is in transition, moving from a closed to a more open society.

The enduring competition between under and above ground structures has many painful elements, especially when each accuses the other of the misdeeds of the past, thereby undermining the credibility of both. This only adds sorrow to the distress of those sympathetic observers whose only desire and concern is for the restoration of unity and harmony. But this pain and tension can serve a positive purpose. In fact, it may, in the end, be a necessary step, as the two systems shift and change, clarifying in the process problems that must be resolved before an authentic reorganization of all social structures can be attained.

One cannot help but notice the infighting that takes place within the underground system, just as intense and disturbing as it is in the open system. The wrangling and acrimony that pits one system against the other, also seeps down to infect the inner life of both. To deny, however, the relevance of the underground just because of the presence of internal bickering is to miss the whole point of the overriding need for the reform of society at large.

What can those who look with sympathy and even compassion upon both sides of the struggle do to help the situation? First and foremost, we can urge both parties to recognize the pain that their mutual opposition fosters in a larger society striving for authentic unity and harmony. A more moderate and reasonable attitude to the problems that separate them would do much to lessen the tensions and pain of the present. However, coercion is to be avoided. To force a merger is not a viable option. Neither side should be forced into a situation it would not willingly espouse and freely embrace. Not only would this be unproductive, it would also wipe out the real gains that both sides have made as they have walked along their separate but related paths.

As far as the highest levels of government authority are concerned, officials at the top must recognize that using autocratic methods to suppress the underground may achieve some short-term effects, but it will prove unsuccessful in the long term. An official policy of partial relaxation of restraints, attractive as it might seem, will only cause the underground phenomena to reappear at another time in another place. Only when the government adopts a policy of granting full freedom and liberty will the underground phenomena disappear. If this is done, not only can both sides claim the victory, but

also the government, delivered from an onus and time consuming burden, can turn its full attention on unifying the disparate elements of the divided lower levels of society. Its first steps should be to respond positively to the felt needs of those communities, thereby dissipating the forces that breed a need for an underground phenomenon. If this fails to take place, and the government insists on an autocratic repressive method for dealing with the problem, then the promise of peace and prosperity for the people of China will be deferred for many more painful years.

Endnotes

1 Cf. the author's *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China: Through Darkness and Lightt,* Chapter 13, "The Rise of the Underground in China," Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre, December 1997, pp. 123-132.

2. Cf. Deng Zhaoming, *Difficult Times and Predicaments—Forty and More Years of the Three Selfs Patriotic Movement,* Hong Kong: The Christian Center for the Study of Chinese Religious Cultures, 1997, with special attention to the article "The Three Selfs and no-Three Selfs Christian Church in the Mainland," pp. 153-158.

3. For a related theory cf. Huang Renyu, *A General History of China.* Taipei: The Lian Jing Publishers, Oct. 1993; Hexun Hepan, *Talks on Chinese History,* Taipei: The Shi Bao Publishers, Oct. 15, 1989. The Marxists have taken a similar view, cf. Engels, Chapter 4, appearing in *The Collected Works of Marx and Engels,* Vol. 4, Beijing: The People's Press, May 1972, pp. 237-254.

4. It is interesting to note that there was no underground in sports activities during the eighties because the sports world in China had already developed to a mature and open stage that fully satisfied the needs of the people. There was no enticement for an underground to exist.

5. Cf. *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China: Through Darkness and Light*, Chapter 8, pp.79-84, Chapter 24, pp. 201-208.

6. For statistics, cf. *Tripod,* No. 96, Dec. 1996, p. 51.

7. Cf. *Tripod* for articles, e.g., Ye Sheng, "Reconciliation within the Chinese Church—Reflections on Culture and Spirituality," 1996, No. 93; "The Old Fishermen, See More Clearly, Love More Deeply;" 1997, No. 97; Wang Yandao, "Division and Unity in the Catholic Church in China," *Tripod,* 1997, No. 99.

8. Cf. The author's "A Preliminary Study in the Degree of Religious Freedom during the Nineties in China." The Hong Kong Christian Institute's bi-monthly, May 1996, No. 37, pp. 4-6.
9. *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China: Through Darkness and Light,* ,Appendix XIII, pp. 287-297.
10.Liu Shaotang in his recent autobiography, *As If It Were I*, bemoans that his position has yielded to a new generation of authors influenced by society's new openness. Cf. *An Already Clear-cut Purpose*, Beijing: the Hua Wen Publishers, July 1993, pp. 315-319,
11.Shen Baoyi, "A Catholic Looks at the Church He Loves," an article which appeared in *Changes in Society and the Church's Response,* Hong Kong: Oct. 10, pp. 133-141.

From our China Pilgrim

The third revolution on the move

One day I saw a young policeman going down Liberty Avenue in Changchun. His cap was a little askew, and his collar was undone. He was steering the bike with one hand and clutching a pot of flowers against his chest with the other. He was happily pedaling along, singing loudly as he went. This was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. "There it is," I said to myself, "that's the third revolution on its way.

Dignity

As I traveled around the Chinese countryside, I discovered magnificent landscapes, fields cultivated with the greatest care, and fine-hearted people. Where I came across poverty, I didn't find it depressing. Indeed, what struck me most about the poor themselves, was their dignity. Even the most modest schools and homes that I visited were beautifully neat and tidy. And what touched me above all, was the respect and even affection that school masters, officials and other members of the community had for the less fortunate among them.