

# *Values of Young People in China Today*

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In the last twenty years, a tremendous change has taken place in the values of Chinese youth. Youth have always been a “weathervane” of social change. Their thoughts, actions and values are a reaction to the changes taking place in society at large at any given historical moment, and indicate society’s future direction.



Understanding the sense of values of young people enables us to grasp the pulse of the times and the direction of social development. Understanding the needs of youth and of society can help the Church plan an adequate response. This essay examines the changes taking place in the value system of Chinese young people, and reflects on how the Church can strategize an adequate response. Christian youth are an integral part of Chinese youth culture, and their faith is an important determining factor in their choice of values. Their faith and their values will serve as the main threads for my analysis of the present situation.

## **Change in the Beliefs and Values of Today’s Youth**

### *The period of faith’s renewal and taking root*

The late 1970s and early '80s were a period of faith’s reawakening in China. Many priests, Sisters and lay people who had survived persecution returned to their parishes and homes, and religious activities gradually revived. A whole generation of young people, however, had grown up under atheism. They had lived through the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, and they were now coming in contact with religious faith for the first time. These

young people, realizing the losses incurred during those catastrophic years, began to think about the future, to search for the meaning of life. Christian youth, the children of the older generation of believers, influenced by their elders began to participate enthusiastically in religious services and activities. This was a period of a reawakening of faith.

During that time, in the midst of winter cold or the blazing summer heat, regardless of wind and rain, everybody, without complaint, participated in open-air religious services, which were extremely moving. A real “resurgence of religious faith” took place after it had been suppressed for so many years. Young people felt that religious faith was mysterious and holy, and they blindly and emotionally believed.

Then full-scale reconstruction of the Church was underway. Clergy, who had just been released from prison or work camp, were concerned about providing a normal religious life for the people, restoring religious venues, and acquiring religious articles and Bibles. Little time was left for them to notice the tremendous changes taking place in the values of young people.

### ***Path of openness and reform***

During the decade of the '80s, everything in China followed the path of openness and change. It also marked an important period in the development of faith among China's youth. Every new wave of thought, new ideas and opinions, led to a complete change of direction for Chinese society. The sudden changes in all aspects of life—economic, political, cultural, moral and religious—had a great impact and influence on youth. Young people began to study religion seriously, and to seek religious faith.

In the early '80s, at the beginning of the changes, a number of Christian youth answered the invitation of their faith communities, and entered the seminaries and convents. They wanted to succeed the older clergy and religious who were now elderly and eager to be replaced. This period saw a rapid development in the faith of the young people. Conversions were abundant, and their faith became firm and mature.

This was a period of great social change, which also brought a weakening of the faith among other young people. They were plunged into confusion. Some of the Christian youth, under

the impact of all kinds of new trends of thought and values, lost their faith completely.

The Church at the time was concentrating most of its energy on rebuilding churches and opening seminaries and convents. Society's knowledge and acceptance of the function and usefulness of religion were extremely limited, as was the Church's influence on society, and on youth. The Church, however, did privately and publicly publish some religious books, organize "formation classes," and did make use of the limited opportunities it had to preach the Gospel, and to guide and encourage the young people. The conversions that resulted at the time are a concrete example of the Church's positive response to the needs of the youth at that time

### ***The period of faith deepening and development***

During the '90s Chinese youth deepened and developed their faith. Along with the expanding openness and change in the country at large, the sense of values of young people also changed. Although they were idealistic and their ideals were characterized by hope and longing, still their values became more pragmatic.

It was not easy to hold on to their ideals in the midst of the "going into business" wave, the rampant consumerism, the craze to make money, or the need and love of money which became the basic values for many people. Many forgot about the meaning of life and life's ultimate purpose. This led to a loss of a sense of direction, and loss of hope among some young people. Suicide among young poets became something of a phenomenon and shook up the people. In 1989, the Beijing University poet, Hai Zi, killed himself by laying on the railroad tracks in Shanhaiguan. In 1991, Ge Mai, another Beijing University poet, committed suicide by throwing himself into a lake near Yuan Ming Yuan Park. In 1993, Gu Cheng killed his wife and then himself overseas. A crisis of faith and of the meaning of life seriously affected people, especially the younger generation.

In the latter half of the '90s and into the new century, people of all walks of life, from the president to the person in the street, began to discuss religion and religion's function in society. Intellectual circles continuously held seminars on religion. The president said that he himself was not only interested in religion,

but that he had also read the Bible, the Koran, and other famous religious books. People discovered that in the absence of any religious faith or any faith in Confucius, and in Lei Feng, society was totally lacking in ethical values. Such a society could only be a society without a future. In this period of reflection, the government recognized that it had to change its passive position and take on a more positive attitude towards religion. It began to publicize all the beneficial aspects of religious ethics, which could be put at the service of society. People once again called for religion, ethics and morality, and praised the values embodied in religious faith.

By witnessing, publishing and service, the Church responded to the needs of youth and of society. In 1998, the first Catholic non-profit NGO, Beifang Jinde, a Catholic Social Service Center, registered with the government. At the same time, many dioceses set up social service offices. They also established libraries, catechetical classes, theology classes and correspondence courses. Young Christians began to participate in religious research, and even established religious research organizations.

From this time on, research into religion developed along practical lines. All kinds of religious or Christian institutes emerged. Through translation, research and publishing, they introduced the theological thought and religious ethical values of every country in the world to Chinese society, in a positive and systematic way. Young people increased their knowledge of religion and social science. The beauty of religious ceremonies, the love of Christ and the profundity of theological thought influenced many young people, and some intellectuals became known as "Cultural Christians." At each Christmas during the 1990s, young students swarm into the church. Their conversion is still in process.

During this period of rapid social change, young people went through waves of cynicism and idealism, and they are now on the road to stability. New converts among the young people have engaged in reflection, and in their own private research on religion in their pursuit of faith. Only after having done that do they become members of the Christian community. Since today's young people did not experience the disaster of the Cultural Revolution nor other painful trials, they are more loyal to the faith and more determined in their search for truth. They work to build a Church of justice and love.

## **Characteristics of the Values of Modern Chinese Youth**

Modern youth are more fortunate than their counterparts of the 1960s and 1970s. This is especially true for young people in the 1990s. Their personalities seem much more cheerful. They do not drift along with the current. Their behavior is more practical and reasonable. They survive by adaptation, and they seek development through creativity. In other words, the manifestation of their sense of values regarding faith, knowledge, spirituality, work, modernization, marriage, consumerism, and other areas of life, all have a special personality, and reflect trends in society's development. Below we will cite a few examples.

Cheerful personalities and a positive attitude towards learning, and an emphasis on "personalizing" things are characteristic of today's youth. They are an energetic, idealistic, and courageous generation. They have an interest in increasing their knowledge, and are both rational and creative. Their strong ideas about learning have their own value, and serve as a motive for seeking higher education. This quest for learning is not without some flavor of "personal advantage." This is, no doubt, due to the pressure of work and the need to receive an income. Nevertheless, it is indeed commendable that young people are striving to better themselves.

During the 1980s a large group of catechumens and Christian youth were in the habit of coming to the church for a weekend "catechism class." They would do this for three months or half a year. This is most admirable and shows how diligently and resolutely they sought to enrich their faith life. Today, along with some middle-aged and elderly included in the group, they actively participate in "theology classes," or sign up for "correspondence courses." Some young people even give up their jobs or go abroad to concentrate on religious studies. Evidently even four to six years of theological education in China are not enough to satisfy the intellectual yearnings of today's Christian youth.

From the 1990s up to the present, groups of priests and pastors have been going abroad to study theology, philosophy, liturgy, Scripture and other subjects. Because only a few are able to go abroad for further studies, other Christian youth have entered universities in China to study literature, philosophy, psychology,

foreign languages and education. This is all done in view of raising their educational standards, and adapting to the needs of people in society and in the Church.

Since the second half of the 1980s, young scholars have been going abroad to study a variety of subjects, including Christianity. Since the 1990s these young people have displayed their talents by publishing books and promoting the establishment of research institutes. In this way they have made a contribution to society. Since scholars in intellectual circles have now undertaken research into Christianity from the point of view of the social sciences, the participation of Christian scholars is urgently needed. Presently, due to the uniqueness of religious research, those among intellectuals regret that the church lacks personnel in this work. Actually, historical and human elements have brought about this situation. It is not that the Church is lacking in personnel or does not seriously regard religious research, but rather that the environment and conditions are not yet ripe.

Reflecting on the fact that today's Christian youth are continuously entering into the field of research, and as Chinese society is becoming more and more open and positive regarding religious research, there will certainly be a breakthrough in the future. Young Christian scholars will definitely play an important role in this field of social research. Therefore, it is clear that the Church not only has to train successors for the older clergy, but also she needs to set up research institutes, in order to adapt to the times and to the needs of society, and to offer youth a fertile environment for research and development.

The Internet has found favor with Chinese youth. Since the year 2000, it has been used as a modern means of mass communication. It has developed rapidly among the churches of China. Wisdom Press of Beijing, Faith Press of Hebei, Guangqi Press of Shanghai, as well as the dioceses of Shaanxi, Guizhou, Chongqing and Shenyang, have all set up websites. Personal websites, which are both creative and lively, are also springing up like bamboo shoots among Christian youth. Because the Internet embraces the whole world, and difficult for people to block, it provides free space for young people to creatively explore life's meaning and values. For instance, Faith Press' chat room and forum is just such a place for young people to discuss the meaning of life

and their sense of values. Everyday, youth from around the world visit our website. One can see that the opportunities for pastoral work, preaching, and spiritual guidance are very great, and the influence far-reaching.

If we compare the values of today's youth with those of an older tradition, we find these values significantly different. Young people not only emphasize the life of the spirit, but they also pay greater attention to material life and the quality of life. For example, the traditional Chinese attitude towards life is: be content with your lot, be hardworking and thrifty, study hard, and bear your burdens. But today's youth seek a life of quality and beauty. They raise doubts about the traditional value system, and challenge it. Some youth do not understand why, though life is now good, their parents repeatedly emphasize industriousness and hard work. The atmosphere of consumerism prevails in the land, but Chinese people with a traditional outlook still emphasize duty, practicality, steadfastness and patience. But today's youth seek novel things. They seek success; they want to travel; to enjoy gatherings of family and friends. They also seek stimulus and enjoyment.

Traditional clothing has always been simple and austere. In Chairman Mao's time everyone wore the same drab color. No one dared to depart from the norm. But today's youth prefer name brands. They like to wear strange, up-to-date, colorful and personalized clothing.

In the face of this change in values, the priests of the older generation are throwing up their hands, worrying and even forbidding people from looking at television, movies and videos, lest they be tempted. They forbid the wearing of modern clothes, in order to avoid giving bad example. Naturally the young people are not easily convinced. Although the Church desires to adapt to the needs of the times and of society, and is putting a lot of effort into developing audio-visual products, for the time being it does not have the means to produce its own CD's and VCD's. It's even more fanciful to think about using radio or television stations to serve the needs of youth and of society.

Another area of tremendous change is today's standards of love and marriage. The Christian values regarding love, marriage and the family are under attack. Love affairs, conception outside of marriage, and extra-marital affairs have already become serious

problems for many youth, for their families, and for society as a whole. Therefore, pre-marital training and marriage counseling are becoming more and more important. In order to meet this need, Faith Press has published some guidance books on marriage and the family. *Your Companion until Old Age*, and *Are You Ready for Marriage?* are examples. The Church still needs professional marriage counselors.

To bind people morally, traditional spirituality emphasized the saving of one's souls, austere penances, and even the threat of excommunication and the last judgment. However, today's youth want to live a pleasant life, and enjoy this beautiful world, which the Creator has given to us. They want to experience a modern, cultured life. Traditional rules of conduct cannot bind or satisfy today's youth, who are used to thinking for themselves, and dare to search for new meaning in life.

The Church's liturgy, obscure and unintelligible Scriptures, boring ceremonies and moralistic doctrine do not attract today's thinking, active youth. Liturgical reform in the Chinese Church, and the efforts of some dioceses to change the prayers and Scriptures into ordinary language are a good response to this problem.

In recent times, we have the phenomenon of young clergy "changing their way of life." This is a concrete manifestation of some lack in their spirituality. When these young people entered the seminary in the early 1980s, they were full of fervor. After they were ordained priests, they were still daring and energetic. However, when society began to change, they found themselves at a loss; they did not have enough experience of life, and their spirituality could not handle the challenges facing them. The Church likewise did not show enough concern for them, nor did it guide them in ways to enable them to resist temptations. To make up for lost time, Faith Press published a translation of George Aschenbrenner's *Quickening the Fire in our Midst – The Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality*; the Jiang Fanhua edited book, *Walking on the Road to Emmaus, Celibacy for Our Times* by Gan Yifeng, and other books on priestly spirituality.



### ***Signs of hope***

With the changes and developments in modern society taking place so rapidly, everyone is very busy. Still a large group among the young clergy has embraced a life of sacrifice. They work around the clock at many different tasks with a spirit of continuous service. The Church should give these service-oriented young people the opportunity to renew themselves, otherwise serious problems may arise. Batteries need to be re-charged. Many tired and hardworking youth are in need of a "rest period." For the sake of their spiritual and mental health, the Church should provide a place and a program for rest and renewal. The Chinese Church really needs an institute for the on-going education of its young clergy. It should also provide a curriculum of study and a place for retreat.

Society as a whole is at the moment receptive to the Christian moral sense of values. The younger generation is becoming more and more open to such Christian values as universal love, compassion, a spirit of sacrifice, equality and forgiveness. Regarding this, Professor Wang Shaochao admits that Chinese young people have already accepted Christian moral values, or will do so in the future.

Concerning democracy and a legal system: After experiencing all kinds of "movements" and "the ten catastrophic years," today's young people are considering the democratic ideas and the rule of law. In striving for democracy and freedom, young people recognize that many of them abuse freedom. "Freedom" does not mean license, the unchecked spreading of the idea of me at the center of the universe, a hatred of authority, and the destruction of structures. For example, too many people ignore traffic regulations, they do not respect public order, do not care for public morality, thoughtlessly spit on the street, etc. The youth think that a legal structure can help to correct this selfish behavior.

Personal relations have also undergone a big change. For example, for hundreds of years, trust among persons revolved around family connections or personal friendships. Such relationships were morally binding. However, since the market economy must function using universal norms of conduct and relationships, young people are acknowledging and accepting the

fact that mutually beneficial relations are built on contracts and laws. Faced with the phenomenon of corruption, young people not only detest it, but they think that only a legal system, transparency and democratic structures can put a stop to it.

Western countries, influenced by democratic ideas, equality, and modern technology, are constantly challenging the authority in the family, in the school, in society itself, and even in the Church. In an informational age based on the Internet, there is no reference to authority in relations between father and son, or between superiors and subordinates. Everyone communicates equally. Of course, today's youth are much in favor of a value system based on equality and democracy. The Church should pay close attention to this development among young people. On the one hand, the Church should reflect on how it can play the role of prophet and speak out for justice in society, and thus walk with the youth. On the other hand, it should continually try to understand the change in thought patterns, and the direction that the values of youth are taking and give them reasonable, timely and adequate guidance.

Actually, from contact with Christian young people, and from observing the changes in their sense of values, it is not difficult to discover some of the problems facing the Church. For instance, many young people are now considering life in religious communities. What is motivating them to make this choice? Christian youth are part of Chinese youth as a whole. In the past, most Christian young people studied in seminaries and novitiates in the interior of China. They knew nothing about religious communities. However, with Christian young people studying abroad and visits by religious from international communities, as well as the publication in China of stories about members of religious orders, young people have now had the opportunity to know something about life in a religious community. Young people must reflect upon what they want to do with their lives and to make a choice. There are the strict requirements of the three vows in religious life, and a community life characterized by democracy, equality, mutual concern and a systematic structure. These make a striking comparison with the dispersed community life in a diocese. Also, the lack of harmony in the relations between the state and the Church create daily problems in the supervision of dioceses. This

situation has drained the Church of much of its energy. The young people, who are working hard to develop Church life, are gradually losing their trust and patience. They desire to enter a religious order, which has clear and strict rules of discipline. At least a religious community can provide the opportunity and the help to develop in such areas as, education, spirituality, works of charity, social service, publishing and the arts. The diocese, which concentrates all its efforts on pastoral work, has no time or energy to take care of the needs of youth.

It is a good thing that the values of young people are changing, and that Christian young people are looking in the direction of religious congregations. However, we must also emphasize that the local Church has to increase its efforts at self-strengthening and at establishing a complete system in order to satisfy the spiritual needs of youth. To gradually set up a religious community compatible with China's national spirit, is just one more urgent need of the Chinese Church. I believe that the time to establish a Chinese religious order has already arrived. At the appointed time, a religious order, in tune with real life, could help solve the Church's problems and meet the needs and challenges of society. At the same time, it is necessary for seminaries to take into account the special characteristics of youth, and teach youth how to gain a foothold in society.

## **Conclusion**

In confronting the developments and changes taking place in the values of youth, the Church needs to be alert and to anticipate the future directions of these developments. It also needs to formulate policies to deal with them. She should promptly meet the needs of youth and encourage them to play a positive role in society.

In this essay we have taken a look at only a few of the characteristics of young peoples' values. If the Church can really make youth work a priority, and offer guidance and help in a timely manner, Chinese youth would trust their Church, and receive a warm response from them. The needs of this generation should be the Church's prime consideration.

At the present time, the Chinese Church is faced with many opportunities, and many challenges. We should seize the opportunities, pursue development and maximize our talents. For over twenty years, internal "divisions" and "factions" have consumed our Christian churches. We have wasted a lot of human, spiritual, and material energy. We have neglected the needs and feelings of this younger generation. It is really a shame that we have lost some wonderful opportunities for development. If we can continually investigate and understand more deeply this particular generation, and continually try to meet their needs, I believe that, with the light of Christ, young people will become a force within the Church, be friends of the Church, who together with the Church will serve other people, and make a significant contribution to society.