

Christianity and Chinese Society During the Past Four Decades

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During the last four decades, China has undergone a radical transformation from an impoverished country with a GDP of less than USD 200 to the second largest economic entity in the world, from a land where most people relied on bicycles for transportation to a country with the largest systems of super highways and high-speed train network in the world. Christianity in China also emerged from a remnant that survived the harsh oppression of the Cultural Revolution by hiding in the shadows to an astonishing community numbering tens of millions visible in every part of the country. Currently there are estimates from 38 to 80 million Protestants and 6 to 12 million Catholics in China, depending on whether one takes the official figures or the unofficial estimates. This article examines the development of Christianity in the context of China's social-political developments during the four decades, and suggests that the development of Christianity in China mirrors the socio-political development of Chinese society as a whole. The term "Christianity" as used in this paper, includes both Protestants and Catholics, and the ecclesial analogy is based more on the Protestant experiences as Protestants constitute the majority of the Christian population in China. This analysis divides the past four decades into four periods with roughly a decade per period. I will describe the general sociopolitical atmosphere of that period by using four analogies that relate to eating, as eating seems to be one of the most significant Chinese cultural preoccupations. It will be followed by a description of the Christian experience with four

different biblical motifs to encapsulate the Christian spirit of the very same period.¹

Phase One: from 1979 to 1989. Have food to eat (吃得上)

From 1979 to 1980, China embarked on an uncharted course of Reform and Open Door policy which began by allowing peasants to keep and sell their products after fulfilling the government quota. Soon there was an increase of agricultural products, followed by the private market, the production of daily commodities and the appearance of small enterprises, along with foreign investments and export-orientated factories. The supply of foods and commodities was increasing and people in general were bewildered. They were enjoying the new-found supplies, especially after having lived through a few decades of impoverishment with basic food and commodities rigidly rationed, interspersed with periods of famine from the Great Leap Forward Campaign (1958-61) and semi-starvation at the height of the Cultural Revolution. The general atmosphere among the population beginning from 1979 was to enjoy the increasing supply of whatever food and commodities, long denied, which were now available. “Have food to eat” became the common social sentiment.

Regarding religious policy, until 1990, religion was regarded as an inferior and distorted worldview. The Party believed that religion would naturally die off as Chinese society advanced. Therefore, there was no active measure to either suppress or promote religion. However, religion was not allowed to have an influence in the public domain, and could only operate within government-sanctioned venues. Despite these constraints, all religions in China experienced growth during the 1980s.

Ecclesial Motif: The Cross

During these ten years, the ecclesial community can be symbolised by the Cross. As the church re-emerged after the

¹ The main thesis of this paper is taken from the author's book, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, Understanding World Christian Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), especially pp. 167-173.

Cultural Revolution, during which religions were totally suppressed by force, few would dream that even such a possibility could occur. Believers hesitated to claim their identity publicly, fearing possible political backlash. As the government showed more determination to uphold their new policy of freedom of religious belief, more Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, began to attend newly reopened churches. Protestants quickly reestablished various meetings and gatherings enabling believers to hold fellowships, bible studies, prayer and worship. As they compared notes, most believers shared similar experiences of suffering and hardships they had endured during the Cultural Revolution. Because of the overwhelming amount of testimonies of persecution, and their various experiences of God's deliverances, the theme of suffering became the most preached on topic in the Protestant Church, with various expositions. Christian sufferings, symbolised by the cross, echoed the spiritual aspiration of many Chinese Protestants during this period of ecclesial reemergence. Believers would identify their sufferings with the suffering of Jesus on the cross, from which they drew encouragement and comfort to soothe the pains and loss from persecution. Also through such spiritual identification with Christ the sufferer, they drew spiritual meaning from their suffering which was not in vain but was meant to both purify their faith and to lay the groundwork for the revival of the Church in China.

The popularity of the teaching on suffering was intensified by two other factors: a lack of religious resources and the local authorities' continuous suppression. During this early phase of ecclesial reemergence, religious resources were scarce; hand-copied hymns and biblical texts were not uncommon. It was a period of great spiritual hunger for any available spiritual material, especially for the Bible as most were destroyed. In 1980, the Protestants in Shanghai reprinted the Bible from templates of the edition printed in the 1950s.² However even the tens of thousands of copies printed were greatly insufficient to satisfy the desire of millions of

² This first batch of reprinted New Testaments and Old Testament/New Testament was printed by the People's Liberation Army Press, as no other printing press had the resources or facilities to undertake this task. (Personal interview with the late Dr. Han Wenzao, Chairperson of TSPM, in Shanghai, 1991.)

Protestants coming out of the shadows. Many tried to smuggle the Bible into China, or even secretly printed them in underground presses at great risk. Also despite the government's clear directive to allow Christians to resume religious activities in the open, many local authorities still acted conservatively on religious policy and, consciously or otherwise, continued to suppress various Protestant groups. These authorities had long experienced many reversals of political decisions during the Cultural Revolution, and they expected the Central Government to retract such a liberal policy on religion at any moment. Consequently the general "rather Left than Right" political stance contributed to the continuous harassment of believers and sustained the continuous teachings on suffering among Protestants until around the early 1990s, when many local authorities gradually shifted to more liberal social policies.

Phase Two : from 1990 to 2000. Have sufficient food to eat (吃得飽)

During the 1980s there was a boom in economic production as many began to taste the sweetness of the market economy, especially many of the Party elites who reaped huge profits by buying state-owned raw materials, such as steel, at government fixed prices, and then selling them to the private sector at market value. Such profiteering was a major cause of the social unrests leading to the June Fourth (1989) student protest. After the suppression of the June Fourth incident, the government went through an intense debate on whether China should go back to socialism to avoid profiteering and corruption, or go ahead with capitalism (i.e. market economy) in line with the Reform and Open door policy. In 1990, China opted to continue the Opening up Policy and started a new chapter of reforming the State-owned enterprises (SOE), increased all kinds of commodity production, encouraged service industries to absorb the newly unemployed SOE workers who had been downsized, and attracted foreign investment and know-how, as well as developed export markets. The State also built extensive infrastructure to speed up economic development, as well as to bridge the economic gap between the more prosperous coastal region and the poorer interior region. China gradually

became the *Factory of the World* during these 10 years with high GDPs, as well as increasing its amount of foreign reserves. The Chinese people were endowed with new found wealth, especially those who engaged in service enterprises, trading, and farming production with an increase of supply and demand for all kinds of goods to satisfy the seemingly insatiable appetite of the new Chinese consumers. The production of household appliances was in high gear, as was the production of various processed foods, and restaurants. Every family wanted to have more to eat, and more appliances (washing machine, TV, watches, tape recorder, etc.) to enjoy. There was also a building frenzy as everyone, and government units, wanted to build new buildings/apartments as half of all the buildings in China were pre-1945, and the newer ones usually dated back to the 1950s and 1960s. A full stomach—a luxury compared with the past—and a household filled with appliances, and a new rooftop. Such were the main goals for most people during this decade of increasing economic prosperity.

In the religious area, from 1990 to 2000, the government regarded religion as a socio-cultural force in human civilisation. The government also allowed the academic study of religion as a cultural phenomenon and permitted religious groups to provide limited charitable services to the public, such as running clinics or elderly homes. More people in China had access to religion, and all religious groups reported a steady growth.

Ecclesial Motif: Rebuilding the Temple

The second period, from 1990 to about the year 2000, can best be illustrated by the Old Testament motif of rebuilding the temple, as recorded in the Book of Nehemiah. As the government's Reform and Open Door policy continued, Chinese society entered an era of prosperity that brought with it new socio-economic challenges. The Christians, after a decade of observing the government's genuineness in carrying out the Reform and Opening Up Policy for real socioeconomic change, were confident enough to invest in a phase of rapid expansion—mainly in quantity rather than quality. Thousands of new churches were built during this ten-year period, alongside the refurbishing of old churches. This rapid

church-building phase also coincided with the general building boom in China as mentioned above. Newly built or refurbished churches rapidly sprang up all over the country, often with gothic battlements and turrets, and topped by a big red cross.

The Amity Foundation, supported by the United Bible Society, was established as one of the first NGOs in China. One of its subsidiaries, Amity Press, began to print Bibles and hymnals in massive numbers. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement/China Christian Council (TSPM/CCC) also ramped up their production capacity to produce basic Protestant religious materials such as hymnals, liturgical order books, devotional and formational literature, decorative materials with Christian symbols and Bible verses, and sermon tapes. Production of basic Catholic materials such as missals, rosary beads, and religious medals and pictures were also in high gear. There was such a huge market for these materials that many underground printing presses and factories emerged, in order to pirate popular Christian materials and try to satisfy the growing demand. Some even pirated the latest Christian literature that had been smuggled in from Hong Kong or Taiwan, and which was not generally available in the officially sanctioned religious organisations.

As the few pastors who had survived the years of persecution were overwhelmed by the upsurge of new believers flocking to the newly opened churches, there was an urgent need for anyone who could preach in the pulpit or lead bible studies. Many short-term, intensive programs ranging from several weeks to several months were established to train lay preachers (*yi gong*—voluntary workers) in basic Christian doctrines and Biblical knowledge. Some Bible schools and seminaries began to re-open after decades of devastation; many with virtually no textbooks or dedicated faculty members. These institutes ran one- and two- year programmes, and trained the first batch of formally trained pastors since the late 1980s and the 1990s. Their objective was to train, as deeply and as quickly as possible a large number of lay preachers and pastors to fill the urgent pastoral needs, and to consolidate the fast-growing Protestant community.

Protestants, and Catholics alike, focused most of their energy on consolidating the church's position by building churches

as a visible presence in society, and by initiating an ever-increasing number of new believers who flocked to any church that opened its doors. When facing such a massive demand, quantity, not quality, was the key. The publication of homilies was popular. Sermons, rather than testimonies, dominated the Protestant worship services and household gatherings. Church building projects became the largest expenditure item for most of the TSPM/CCC churches. Fundraising campaigns were in high gear. The atmosphere somewhat resembled the rebuilding of the Second Temple recorded in the Book of Nehemiah, as this biblical motif—rebuilding the Temple—became one of the most popular themes among the Protestants, be it from the pulpit, in Church publications, or at fundraising campaigns. In contrast to the physical church buildings of the TSPM/CCC, the Autonomous Christian Communities (hereafter referred to as ACCs, also known as House Churches or Underground Churches) considered their role in rebuilding the temple as the establishing of a spiritual temple. Their primary focus was on faith formation and evangelism, which led to a major phase of church planting all over China. Having massive numbers of lay preachers became the norm in church leadership, especially in rural areas where there were simply not enough professional pastors to shepherd the ever-growing flock. The church was now in an expansion phase that went beyond the survival mode of the previous decade.

The Third Phase: From 2000 to 2012. Have quality food to eat (吃得好)

During this third phase, the country launched into a capitalistic society with high growth in virtually all economic sectors such as finance, real estate, and high tech. China became an emerging economic giant. Chinese tourists and investors began to trot around the globe. The Chinese people no longer just looked for sufficient food to fill their bellies, but now looked for gourmet food to satisfy their discerning palates. International brand-name goods were popular, and quality goods were sought after by Chinese consumers. The newly emerged middle class were heading to international holiday destinations, such as Paris, Rome Tokyo and

London. Soon China began to make a remarkable imprint hosting the Shanghai Expo and the Beijing Olympics, the most lavish one ever held. China's appetite for quality living has been whetted.

As China achieved tremendous economic progress during this decade, new social issues, such as urban poverty and income disparity emerged. Pragmatically, the government allowed non-governmental organisations, including religious groups, to address social needs. In the religious realm, the government made specific appeals, and even demands in some regions, for religious groups to operate charitable social projects such as building schools, providing scholarships, running free clinics, or doing voluntary work to help the needy population, as a means to support the government's socio-political and economic objectives. Since then, religion has reached Chinese society on an unprecedented scale and gained increasing visibility in the public domain. Intellectuals, businesspeople, entertainers, media celebrities, and even family members of prominent party leaders, have been drawn to religion. Indeed, religion has become a rather fashionable trend at the expense of the Party's popular influence. It seems that religion, and Christianity in particular, has enjoyed astonishing growth in these three decades despite various shifts of governmental position on religion, a growth somewhat in parallel with the phenomenal economic boom of China during the same period.

Ecclesial Motif: The Golden Lampstand

Ever since the year 2000, China has experienced an unprecedented period of social and economic prosperity. Internationally, China is enjoying an ever-increasing importance in global affairs. Domestically, China is shifting into a diverse society with a fast growing middle class, supported by increasing wealth. Within this sociopolitical context, the Church in China has become more dynamic than the previous two decades, particularly as Church leadership becomes younger, more energetic, and more sophisticated. The believers no longer long for quantity, but instead demand quality, when it comes to pastoral services and Christian resources. The most popular type of Bible is no longer the simple standard edition, but versions with commentaries or leather bound

gift editions. Various forms of worship, new hymns, theological classes, internet discussion groups, and media chat groups are slowly replacing long sermons as popular forms of Protestant activities. Pastors, too, often feel inadequate and seek to upgrade their training with emphasis on pastoral skills and specialisations such as Church administration or pastoral counseling.

During this period, the Church has worked to become an authentic element of Chinese society that can make contributions to China. The Church is no longer focused merely on its own survival needs, but also on the needs of a society reeling from rapid social changes. Churches have begun to experiment with social services such as orphanages, medical clinics, elderly hostels, and providing community services or scholarships. Furthermore, the Church has started to stress the theme of holiness; urging believers not to follow the world's moral standards, particularly as traditional Chinese social values of modesty quickly fade, giving way to consumerism, individualism, and materialism. The Church wants to be part of Chinese society in an authentic way and at the same time remain rooted in the transcendent realm. During this time, many Church leaders use the Biblical motif of the Golden Lampstand (Revelation 1: 12-3)³ as an ecclesial symbol for the Chinese Protestant community, as the church is built after the design of God to give light to the world and to remind the world of the Divine Glory through the holiness of the believers. The Chinese Church, much like the Golden Lampstand, would like to shine forth the glory of God in China through its good deeds and moral teachings.

The Fourth Phase: From 2012 to 2018. Have food to share (吃得開)

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China strives to be a Great nation in the world and he called it the “China Dream,” meaning

³ Hymn #127 “I Love the Chinese Protestant Church” in the national *Hymnody* (TSPM/CCC) has used this motif to describe the Chinese Church. This hymn became one of the most popular hymns sung in TSPM/CCC churches across the whole nation during major church events, such as anniversaries or dedications of new church building; it expresses the ecclesial aspirations of the Chinese Protestant Church.

that China can regain her past glory in history as a key player to shape global affairs. China is increasing its international influence in virtually all spheres of the international arena: from peacekeeping to investments, from world trade to aerospace. China has initiated the Belt and Road Initiative,⁴ perhaps the biggest and certainly the most ambitious inter-regional economic entity. The sentiment is to go out and to engage the world; the actions are to share and to connect with the rest of the world. China becomes the Big Brother who would share with, and help all those smaller nations willing to subject themselves to China's political-economic leadership, as well as the model of economic development which China has gone through. The analogy "have food to share," literally "eat openly" or metaphorically "one can have many friends to share a meal with" may perhaps capture the sentiment of the ambitious national sentiment. To go out of China and to share what China has now become catchphrases, be it for Chinese entrepreneurs, Chinese tourists, Chinese infrastructure engineers, Chinese aid workers, or Chinese students.

On the religious front, since 2012 there has been a significant ideological shift in China, resulting in more active government intervention in religion in general, and a tightened hold on Christianity in particular. Three factors contribute to this shift: national security, the political theory of "Peaceful Evolution," and the model of religious ecology. First, in 2013 the Chinese government established a National Security Committee, which, among other fields such as education, media, national minorities, included religion within its jurisdiction on the grounds that religion could have political implications that might threaten national security. Religion is no longer treated as a cultural phenomenon or a social group, but as a social element with implications for national security.

Secondly, the theory of "Peaceful Evolution" has resurfaced in China. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, in the early 1990s the Chinese Government believed that the

⁴ Or better known as the One Belt One Road initiative, a vision of President Xi Jinping to develop the Eurasian Continent into a China-led economic zone involving 60+ countries.

collapse of Communist rule in Europe was primarily due to the long-term coordinated efforts of the U.S.A. and NATO in undermining the basic structure of socialist countries in Europe through cultural, political, religious, and economic means on various levels.⁵ The Chinese named this Western strategy “Peaceful Evolution” (*heping yanbian*). Christianity allegedly played an important part in this strategy such as the case of the Polish Catholic Church in support of the Solidarity Movement.⁶ Wang Zuo’an, Director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (now absorbed into the Party’s United Front Work Department), in his book on religious policy suggested that in order to protect the security of China, the country must be wary of such “peaceful evolution” in the area of religion (particularly regarding Christianity).⁷ “Peaceful Evolution” did not catch on in the Party’s ideological circles until 2013 when it was adopted as part of the new national policy. Since then Christianity has been cast as a prime suspect, a potential base for anti-governmental political activities.⁸

⁵ From the personal communication of the author with scholars who conducted these studies, in 1992 and 1993. Subsequently dozens of books were published in China using this term “*heping yanbian*” – “peaceful evolution” – as the main theme, or even the title, of the books.

⁶ See Jiang Zemin’s “Party Secretary Jiang Zemin’s talk on Resist Peaceful Evolution and Strengthen the Building of the Party,” in *Beijing Youth Daily*, August 23, 2001, accessed from <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/guandian/26/20010823/542133.html>

⁷ Wang Zuo’an, *The Religious Issues and Religious Policy of China* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Religious Cultural Press, 2002), p. 398.

⁸ In October 2013 the National Defense University of the People’s Liberation Army released a movie entitled “Silent Contest” (《較量無聲》) which represented the thinking of the current leftist faction in China. At the beginning of this movie, the Chinese Communist Party’s view on the Cold War is reiterated: the collapse of the USSR was the result, not the end, of the Cold War. It then goes on to suggest that China is the United States’ next target in the Cold War. This movie went viral in China, and was briefly suspended during the Party’s Central Committee meeting in November 2013, but has now become the rallying point for the Leftist faction in China. It is generating numerous serious discussions among Chinese netizens, but at the same time dismissed as rubbish by the West. The film is available on the internet: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_8ISjcoSW8.

Third, the Government has embraced a model of *religious ecology* in which all religions are seen as different plants in a garden. The civil authority, functioning as the gardener, needs to manage this garden so that all the different types of plants have a fair chance to grow. The government interpreted the fast growth of Christianity, compared to the growth of other religions, as unhealthy. Therefore, the government took measures to curb the growth of Christianity by controlling mission activities in China and limiting Christian groups from receiving support from abroad. At the same time, the government encouraged the growth of other religions by funding and promoting international events for Buddhism and Daoism, so that all religions in China would have equal resources for competitive development and China could develop a balanced religious ecology within which all religions live in harmony with each other.

Furthermore, in March 2016, the government called for a National Religious Work Conference chaired by President Xi who affirmed the following new directives in religious policy: 1) the government would direct, instead of guide, all religions in China and thereby take a more active role in controlling religious groups; 2) all religious groups in China should be sinicised, meaning religions cannot embrace or promote values of the Western world, and must incorporate social values as dictated by the Chinese Government; 3) the administration of religious affairs would expand from departmental (SARA/RAB) control to a higher administrative level, where the coordination of many ministries such as education, public security, and others, would also have a role in overseeing religious affairs. In 2017 the Government issued a new code of religious regulations (which took effect on 1 February, 2018), imposing tighter control on Christianity. As a result, many local authorities removed Christian signs from public view, banned church summer camps, prohibited all minors from entering churches, and closed Christian-operated kindergartens and schools. It seems that Christianity, which has traditionally borne a foreign image, will face much tighter control in the days to come.

Ecclesial Motif: Jerusalem

Despite the increasing constraints imposed on Christianity, the Protestant community had begun an overseas mission initiative since the beginning of this century, and has begun to send missionaries abroad for over ten years with many already serving in different countries. It originated with scores of Chinese missionaries in the 1940s who had the vision of preaching the Gospel from Xinjiang through west Asia to Jerusalem. It was known as the Back to Jerusalem Band, but none left China. They were banned by the new Chinese government in the early 1950s. However their vision of Back to Jerusalem (BTJ) was rekindled in the late 1990s among the ACCs and many mission training institutes, all underground, had since sprung up. In the process, the original idea of evangelising the Muslim world in Central and Western Asia, and ending in Jerusalem has gradually evolved to a wider vision called the Indigenous Mission Movement (IMM), challenging Chinese Protestants to evangelise the unreached, especially the peoples living in the 10/40 Window,⁹ and not only Muslims but also Hindus and Buddhists living between China and Jerusalem. As the Chinese government pushes forward the Belt and Road Initiative which geographically covers most of the population within the 10/40 windows including the majority of the Muslim population, Chinese Protestants are furthering their missiological vision by incorporating this China-led economic project into a platform for Chinese missionaries to gain access to the Muslim-dominated areas for the completion of the Mission Mandate¹⁰ before the End Times.

Reliable sources suggest that there are already several dozen mission-training centers in China, as well as many outside China, and hundreds of candidates are currently in training. At least a thousand Chinese missionaries have already been dispatched to the field, and some vanguard teams are establishing support bases

⁹ A concept developed by Luis Bush in 1990 to denote the region between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator, an area with the highest concentration of non-Christian populations.

¹⁰ The Mandate given by Jesus to all disciples to evangelize the world.

called “caravan stations” along major hubs on the Belt and Road Initiative’s trade routes. BTJ has been getting an increasing amount of international attention and financial support, especially from pro-Israel, Christian Zionist, Evangelical, and Charismatic mission agencies in the West, and also from Chinese Protestants in the Diaspora. There are also an increasing number of Catholics from China who are joining international missionary orders involved in global mission as well. Chinese missionaries are now becoming a new mission force in global mission, with Jerusalem as their motif and “spiritual food” to share with other people who have yet to hear the Good News.

Conclusion

Having food to eat, having sufficient food to eat, having quality food to eat and having food to share represent, in a crude form, the aspiration of Chinese society during the past four decades. The biblical motifs of the Cross, the Rebuilding of the Temple, the Golden Lampstand, and Jerusalem correspond to four stages of the ecclesial journey of the Chinese Protestant Church, and to a lesser extent, the Catholics in China as well. The Christian community in China has gone from surviving, to consolidating, and now into the outreach phase. Metaphorically it went through the lack of food, having sufficient food, and raising the quality of food, to having a surplus of food to share with others. It has experienced the pain of suffering, the exaltation of rebuilding, and the challenge of taking root in Chinese society at a time when China is facing tremendous social challenges from income polarity, an aging population, extreme consumerism, the disintegration of traditional marriage and family systems, to ecological conservation, and now to global Christian community sharing the mission burden to spread the Good News to the Unreached. The ecclesial journey of Christians in China during the past four decades runs parallel to the socio-political developments of Chinese society as a whole. As China is heading towards an uncharted course in search of its new role in the global order, Chinese Christians travelling as the people of God, and witnessing to God’s grace in China and beyond, are still proceeding with their pilgrimage.