

# *Christianity in China during the Country's Transition to a Market Economy*

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Over the last 40 years, mainland China has undergone tremendous changes in terms of politics, the economy, society and religion. This article focuses on how China's transformation to a market economy affects Christianity. Specifically, it will discuss the intrinsic link between the market, wealth, property rights and the development of Christianity.

## **Relations between the economy and faith, and the questions they raise in China**

There are two well-known propositions regarding the relationship between the market and religious development. One theory, as put forward by Karl Marx, posits "the base determines superstructure." In "Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" (1859), Marx wrote, "the totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness." According to this theory, a country's income level and economic system are the conditions that shape religious development. Another proposition is Max Weber's "the Protestant ethic and capitalism,"<sup>1</sup> which implies that the innovation of religious conception comes before economic development. These two apparently contradictory propositions—which one has been

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<sup>1</sup> Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons, and Anthony Giddens (London and Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1930; German edition published 1904-05).

verified in China's practice? The developments in the last 40 years offer some preliminary answers.

In mainland China, since 1978 the "base" has changed from a government-led planned economy composed of state-owned enterprises, collective enterprises and people's communes to a market economy based on private enterprises and the right of private property. The transformation to a market economy brought about continuous income growth and a vast amount of wealth for China. It also formed new relationships regarding property rights and a new concept of rights. Meanwhile, Christianity in China began to recover and develop gradually after being dormant during the "Cultural Revolution" period.

Note that what is referenced here as Christianity in China includes not only the government-sanctioned Catholic Church, the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and Orthodox Church, but also those Protestant family churches (or "private meeting places" as the government calls them) that are not recognised by the government, and those emerging religious groups which identify themselves as Christian but that the government considers as "cults." Although these religious bodies take different forms, they share the following characteristics: being introduced into China from abroad since the Ming and Qing Dynasties; the Bible as the classic source of faith; and the worship of God and Jesus.

For Christianity, the opportunities, challenges and long-term impact brought on by the changes in the economic system are obvious, requiring deep reflection. For example, how does the rise of market economy affect the development of faith? Is the increase in material wealth more advantageous to the Church's social services, or does it erode the foundation of faith and bring about corruption and "secularisation" in the Church? Are the theologies advocated by the churches consistent with the new concept of rights? Is there a need for innovation and adjustment?

### **The spiritual market behind the rise of the material market**

In classical Marxism, religion is an outcome of poverty and suffering. Marx wrote in his "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's

Philosophy of Right" that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, mainland China showed a different picture. During the period of 1949-1978, when religion was almost completely eliminated, people fell into deeper poverty. As people's income level continued to grow after 1978, various religions all over the country showed a phenomenon of rapid "revival."

In this regard, researchers suggested a new interpretation. Some thought that as the people's income level increased, they would have a higher demand for spiritual satisfaction, after material needs were fulfilled. Some saw the opening of religious venues and the facilitating of the return of church properties at the beginning of the reforms as a means to attract foreign investment. Other studies proved that the process of urbanisation and industrialisation brought about tremendous changes in traditional lifestyles and caused widespread spiritual needs. These studies revealed the law of a parallel development of religion along with economic development, and considered the existence of the material market as a prerequisite for the development of the spiritual market.

However, from looking more closely at the origin of historical change, that is not the case for the relationship between the material market and the spiritual market. This is because people experience conceptual changes prior to any new behavior. Without a new conception, it is hard to adopt innovative behavior. For China after 1978, the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy was not only a continuous innovation in practice, but also an ideological revolution. In this sense, "emancipating the mind" was indeed the premise of "liberating productivity." Freedom of belief, the free transmission and expression of thoughts are key to "emancipating the mind." If a country considers religion as "feudal superstition" that must be prohibited, or restricts the free practice of religion, it would fundamentally limit economic reform and innovation.

So was the government the only initiator of "emancipating the mind"? Or was it driven by the chief architect of reform? More

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm/>.

and more studies show that before the government began to promote market reform, some local people had been making spontaneous market trading actions with the support of certain faith identity groups.<sup>3</sup> Among these “pioneering” groups, Christians held a significant position. This is because even in the decade of the “Cultural Revolution,” there remained a number of believers with a strong faith hiding in their own houses or gathering secretly in remote mountains. These secret gatherings became the origin of the later Protestant “family church” and the Catholic “underground church.” The Christian faith provided people in these gatherings with what was different from the government-dominated “Mao Zedong worship” and the ideology of that time. This made it easier for them to get rid of the dogma of the planned economy, and enabled them to adopt flexible market trading activities based on the actual situation.

Wenzhou is a typical place where family churches quietly developed. Although in 1959 Wenzhou was declared the only “non-religious region” in the country, the first family church was established in Wenzhou City in January of 1961, and a localised “preaching mode” emerged at this particular time.<sup>4</sup> Although some scholars have analysed the important influence of Christianity on the rise of Wenzhou’s entrepreneurship since the reform and opening-up,<sup>5</sup> they were less aware of the fact that before 1978, such a limited spiritual market had already provided important support

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<sup>3</sup> Despite a lack of systematic research, there is evidence that hidden market trade activities were carried out in regions where Islam and traditional Chinese religions were practised during the “Cultural Revolution.” Even in Xiaogang Village in Fengyang, Anhui Province, which took the first step in “contracting production quotas to individual households,” behind its marketisation reforms, there was also support from the traditional faith communities.

<sup>4</sup> Chen Yuxiu [陳毓秀], “Wenzhou ren di qunti xing fenliu yu xuanjiao yundong de quanxi” [溫州人的群體性分流與宣教運動的關係] in *Mai Zhong* [《麥種》], 2009, volume 3.

<sup>5</sup> Nanlai Cao. “Christian Entrepreneurs and the Post-Mao State: An Ethnographic Account of Church-State Relations in China’s Economic Transition.” *Sociology of Religion*, 68, no. 1, Spring, 2007.

for the spontaneous market trading activities of the Wenzhou people. As early as in May 1956, Wenzhou's Yongjia district had quietly tried out contracting production quotas to individual households in China's farming villages for the first time. During the "Cultural Revolution," Wenzhou "acted against the policy" with Liu City/Liushi setting up a neighborhood enterprise named "General Electric Factory." By 1978, the output value of this electric factory reached 100 million yuan. Throughout the 1970s, Wenzhou people roamed around the country to make money with a knife, a pair of scissors and a cotton bow. The "four-thousand spirit" ("having borne thousands of hardships, having gone through thousands of hardships, having said thousands of words, having traveled thousands of miles, and having thought of thousands of ways") is a vivid portrayal of how Wenzhou people developed markets. The unique spiritual resources behind them are also worthy of attention.<sup>6</sup>

### **Accelerating wealth as a double-edged sword for Church development**

The law that market economy can increase wealth has been proved once again in mainland China. The impact of growing wealth on the Church is multifaceted, and both its benefits and negative consequences are emerging.

In general, the growth of wealth provided an indispensable good foundation for the Church's revival. First, the restoration and construction of churches got financial support. Churches across the country multiply. In "areas which became prosperous first," some churches look grand and beautiful. Second, wealth has also become one of the incentives to attract more people to commit to Church development. No matter whether the Church was in the city or in a rural area, growing income among the faithful brought about a rise in offerings. This made it possible for more people to choose to be priests, pastors or ministers. Third, the increase in wealth has made the Church's various ministries possible. Among all ministries,

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<sup>6</sup> Zhou Dewen & Wu Bizhe [周德文、吴比著]. *Sihai jie shang: wenzhou ren de chuang fu shi 1978-2010* [《四海皆商：温州人的创富史 1978-2010》] (zhejiang daxue chuban she, 2011 [浙江大学出版社, 2011年]).

charity became the main channel for the Church to serve society. Hebei Jinde Charities Foundation and the Amity Foundation in Nanjing are the two faith-based charitable organizations which are larger in scale and more regulated. The former was founded with the support of Catholic priests and faithful, while the latter relies mainly on the Protestant Church. In addition, local churches around the country also provide a variety of charitable services, which not only meet the needs of mutual help within the Church, but also become an effective complement to solve social problems.

However, growth in wealth also seems to bring some negative impact on Church development. For example, some Churches put huge amounts of capital into church-construction instead of into innovation in theology or social services. Sometimes driven by competition, magnificent churches were built that look too conspicuous and dazzling for some people. Such impressions eventually became an important motivation for the demolition of churches and church crosses. In other cases, due to imperfect financial management, the rapid increase in wealth has led to the breeding of corruption within some churches. Some people made use of loopholes in the Church's imperfect management structure to take church properties or offerings from the faithful for their own use. In order to obtain the right to control church goods, endless conflicts and infighting have arisen within the Church. Furthermore, due to the growing income gap among regions, there are different levels of hardship and joy in the Church. The traditional rural Church mainly gathers the old, young and poor. Where the churches are short on money, the pastors are generally under-trained, and Church development is limited.

Even charitable activities that are widely recognised both inside and outside the Church prompt reflections. Some question whether it is possible for charitable activities of the Catholic Church in China to gradually change from a "servant model" to a "prophetic model." With "the servant model," the Church can more easily carry out its functions without risks, while the "prophetic model" involves more tension with the government and society. In

reality, more churches have chosen the former model.<sup>7</sup> Looking more in-depth, the growth of wealth and offerings can simply solve people's material poverty, while deep-level spiritual difficulties and poverty require the Church to provide more charitable services.

### **Growing awareness of rights while defending rights**

In the process of market transformation, the right to private property is gradually recognised and protected by law in China. In line with this, various property rights of the Church are recognised as well. The Church's property rights began with the return of churches, though those returned were only a small part of the churches that had been confiscated. Beginning with churches, other property rights and personal rights in the Church were also gradually recovered. In government-sanctioned churches, the Church does not have the status of a juridic person (the Association is the juridic person), but basically it can carry out various service activities. However, in what the government considers as "private meeting places," there is always the possibility that their right to carry out such activities would be abrogated.

Even in government-sanctioned churches, some rights are restricted. For instance, the "Notice of Further Implementing the 'Opinions on Encouraging and Regulating Religious Circles' Participation in Public Welfare Charitable Activities'" stated: "Religious circles must adhere to the principle of non-profit making in carrying out charitable activities, conduct activities in accordance with the law, strictly abide by State laws and regulations, and propagating religion during charitable activities is not allowed."

Property rights are the basis of other rights. In the last 40 years of reform and opening-up, with the widespread acceptance of property rights, the concept of rights in mainland China has been expanding gradually from the right to property to freedom of speech, the right to vote, and the freedom of religious belief.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. J.B. Zhang [張士江], "Zongjiao zai zhongguo shehui de juese zhuanbian ji zuoyong" [宗教在中國社會的角色轉變及作用], presented at a 2008 seminar on "Religion and Society: The Challenge of Multiple Identities" in Sigtuna, Sweden.

In a survey based on a WeChat circle of friends, I found that compared with other religious or faith groups and non-religious groups, Chinese Christians showed a higher recognition of, and respect for various rights including property rights, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. However, further analysis of the survey indicated that this tendency is not primarily a result of theological preaching within the church; rather, it has to do with the rights of these churches being violated. Members of churches that do not have legal status, and whose churches or church crosses have been demolished have a stronger sense of rights.

A closer look reveals that although Christianity in China has resumed development since the 1980s, the focus was usually on building churches and carrying out religious activities, while innovation in theology has not made much progress. Coupled with long isolation from the outside world, there is less understanding of modern concepts of rights and the rule of law. Take Catholicism as an example, although the Second Vatican Council in 1965 incorporated the spirit of "liberty, democracy and human rights" into Catholic teaching, and the "Declaration on Religious Freedom" was promulgated. These concepts, however, were not transmitted in time to mainland China. Even to this day, only a few church ministers understand or accept these ideas.

On the whole, Christian theological development in China lacks the content of modern rule of law, and the concept of rights. There are only some abstract theological principles and an evaluation of justice based on individual religious sentiments. What really pushed Chinese Christians to have a modern concept of rights and a rule of law mentality were the various violations of rights that they encountered in reality. In the process of defending the Church's own rights and the rights of other people, some Christian rights lawyers emerged. By the same token, some clerics began to pay attention to, and learn about the concepts of rights and rule of law, using this knowledge to defend the rights and interests of the Church, while actively spreading these ideas to the faithful.

Regarding the Church's future development, many rights still need to be re-defined and legally guaranteed, e.g., the protection of Church property, the internal management of the Church's temporal goods, expanding venues for evangelisation, the



ability to evangelise (to youth and children), and diversifying the content of charitable services. Historically, Catholics and Protestants both placed great emphasis on education services. How to obtain the right to work in education is an issue that needs to be addressed in the future. In the short term, these rights can perhaps make a little progress, but their full realisation hinges on the establishment of the rule of law in society in the future.

### **To be "salt and light" of Chinese society and the path to realisation**

To sum up, while the transformation to a market economy has brought tremendous changes to mainland China, the market continues to move forward in accordance with its own logic, namely that trade creates wealth, wealth expands rights, and rights need to be recognised. Although Christianity does not approve of some unique behaviors and rights operating in the market, it has learned about the unique functions of market trade and the importance of defending rights. In the future, whether Christianity becomes a "guardian" of the market economy in China or a "balancer" of forces on the market will depend on how it positions itself.

In my view, Christianity should hold fast to its position of being "salt and light" in mainland China. Specifically, as "salt and light" of contemporary Chinese society, Christianity needs to maintain the market economic system's basic "salt-like" value of promoting human well-being. At the same time, Christianity must function as "light" of the Christian faith to lead people to spiritual growth. The Christian Church should also realise that separation of the Church and State, and religious freedom are like "salt" that deters internal corruption. They are also basic conditions that enable Christian social services to act as "light" to provide warmth to more people. Like "salt", the "Church as servant" works to satisfy the basic needs of more people, while the "Church as prophet"—as light to the world—promotes the realisation of modern human rights and rule of law.