

## Christianity in China Today

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### Abstract

While China has become the world's fastest-growing economy in recent three decades of reform and opening-up, it has also witnessed the fastest-growing of Christianity in the country's modern history. Are there inner and necessary connections between the two phenomena? Why? How about the current situation of Christianity in this big Communist regime? This article treats the topic in three aspects: the size of Chinese Christian population, the relations between church and state in China, the challenges and opportunities of Christianity in China today.

**Keywords:** History of Christianity in China, Christianity Population, Relations between Church and State

As we all know, Christianity is the world's largest and most important religion, and China is the most populous but traditionally non-Christian country in the world, so if these two subjects come together, they could be synthesized into a very significant topic of religious studies. Since China is now often called a rising power in the rapidly globalizing world today, the topic should be even more worth noting and investigating than ever before.

I will share my brief presentation in three aspects: the size of Chinese Christian population, the relations between church and state in China, and the challenges and opportunities of Christianity in China today. But because of the limitation of my research scope, what I call "China today" refers just to China's mainland during a period of time that is roughly coincided with the so-called "China's 30 years of reform and opening-up" that is from the beginning of the 1980's to now.

### The Size of Chinese Christian Population

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Christianity in China today is comprised of all the three kinds of traditional church group –Protestant churches, Roman Catholic churches and Eastern Orthodox churches. But as is generally estimated, there are only some small Russian Eastern Orthodox churches in northern

China's Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang minority regions or Beijing and Shanghai's expatriate residential areas, and compared to China's huge population, they are too small to be recognized as a substantial religious existence in China. So in mainland China today, Christianity is often considered as largely composed of two parts –the Roman Catholic churches and the Protestant churches.

As it has been so often asked and so controversial in academic research field, the most basic question about Christianity in China today seems to be how large is size of the Chinese Christian population. But unfortunately, so far as I know, there isn't a generally accepted statistical data or estimate for this question. Religious identity is, especially that of Christianity, still a political sensitive issue, and China's national census did not collect religious information of the people, so there isn't any authoritative and accurate statistics about religious situation at the national-wide level. But in recent years, some official institutes, independent organizations and individuals had launched several sample surveys and field researches for this problem. The results of them are very different.

However, all the sources have announced their estimates publicly and claimed they have got the figure of the elephant. According to *Bluebook of Religion: Annual Report on China's Religions (2010)* issued by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the total number of Christian population in China is about 30 million, including over 23 million of Protestants and about 6 million of Catholics, and both of them are included a little part of un-baptized frequent church goers.<sup>1)</sup> The report had declared its result comes from a full population survey and has taken into account both registered churches and unregistered churches all over the country. But this result cannot be generally accepted by scholars within the China or from abroad. The simplest reason lies in that how can this kind of official survey get enough and representative questionnaires from Chinese Christians, especially those of unregistered house churches, since religious identity is still a politically sensitive issue in China and Christianity is far more sensitive than other traditional Chinese religions. But nevertheless, the figure issued by CASS is generally considered as a reference represented the most conservative estimate of Chinese Christian population.

On the contrary, there are far more optimistic estimates produced from surveys and researches launched by some independent organizations and individual scholars. For instance, Asia Harvest, an inter-denominational Christian ministry working in Asia, reported also in the year of 2010 that there are about 104 million Christians of all ages in mainland China (nearly 8% of the its' total population). And according to an online report at Christianity Today, the stronghold of evangelical media in North America, the Christian population in China today should have reached to 130 million.<sup>2)</sup> This is the most ambitious assessment until now. But it should be noted that these two estimates had taken into account of the non-adult children of Christian believers as Christian people as well.

Between the most conservative semi-official figure supplied by CASS to the most

ambitious assessment of Christianity Today, there are some moderate estimates about China's total Christian population. Among them, I would like to recommend a reasonable estimates supplied by Pew Forum, a famous nonpartisan American think tank organization. According to its report which released in the end of 2011, the figure of Chinese Christian population should be around 5% of the country's total population, or 67 million Christians of all ages. This figure includes also non-adult children of Chinese believers and un-baptized persons who attend Christian worship services.

In the above introduction, I have offered three levels of estimates about Chinese Christian population. Each one has its own reasons and methodology, but due to the fact that the size of the unregistered churches in China is just like an elephant in the darkness, no one can exclusively claim his having approached the truth.

If some of you remain puzzled about the issue, I would like to present one more useful frame of reference. According to the report of Amity Printing Company, China's government-sanctioned Bible printer for Protestant churches, it has printed nearly 90 million Bibles since its founding in 1987 to the end of 2011. It has also reported that the total number can be broken down as 56 million for distribution in churches within China's mainland, and 33 million for overseas markets.<sup>3)</sup> But anyone who has some experiences about the unregistered churches in China would know that the main part of the "33 million for overseas markets" has through some "smuggling channels" in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan or other places returned to the domestic market –the unregistered house churches in mainland China, because the Amity Company don't sale bibles to house churches directly. Therefore, according to my own estimation, there are at least 80 million Bibles used by Chinese Christians, and this number does not include a few millions of Catholic Bible –Si Gao Sheng Jing, a very different translation to the Protestant Union version and, of course, has seven Deuterocanons.

Moreover, I would like to share some of my own experiences about this issue. Seven years ago, a brother of our Bible fellowship had got a job transfer from Chengdu to Beijing, and he worried for some days about how to find a new religious gathering that fits him in the new city. Unexpectedly, just in the second Sunday morning, he heard the sounds of his familiar psalms singing from a room just in the same unit of the same apartment building he lived. And six years ago, I moved from Sichuan province to Hubei province myself, as I had graduated then with my doctorate from Sichuan University and came to work at Hubei University of Arts and Science. It was my turn to be surprised that just a few days after my setting down, I found a tiny poster on a pillar of road lamp in the campus, said "Do you want to know what does the gospel mean? Tel. ..."

## The Relations between Church and State

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Up to now, the Communist government of China has still adopted the ancient tradition of religious administration which Prof. Zhuo Xinping, director of the Institute of World Religions (IWR) in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, had summarized as “politics, being the dominant, religions, the subordinate” (政主教從, pinyin: zhèng zhǔ jiāo cóng)<sup>4</sup>. In ancient China, the official ideology is a mix of Confucianism and totalitarian politics. Confucianism is also a dominant religion in a triangle Chinese religious and cultural system which is fabricated by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Since the Chinese Communist party assumed power of China in 1949, the ancient totalitarian politics which is originated from Qin Dynasty (221-209 B.C.) has remained, but the ancient Confucianism has been replaced by Marxism-Leninism, a quasi-religion of Communist. So all the other religions must pledge loyalty to the Chinese Communist party and its ideology, and all the other religious organizations and professionals have to be sanctioned, registered and licensed by the atheist government. In other words, the principle of separation between church and state which is prevalent among modern international community has not been adopted in the Socialist PRC ever since its foundation.

Furthermore, because the Western colonist and the Christian missionary came to Qing Dynasty (1636-1911) China almost side by side and brought about a lot of conflicts and bitter historical memory, Mao Zedong and his successor always consider that Christianity was once upon a time the tool of Imperialism invasion and may be now and in the future a tool of “peaceful evolution” of the Western Powers. So the government of PRC is very sensitive to the ties between Chinese churches and Western powers, and all the religious affairs related to Christianity are regarded to some extent matters related to national security. In this context, Chinese Protestant church leaders had launched “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” in the early 1950’s, and almost in the same time Chinese Catholic church leaders had launched “Patriotic Anti-Imperialism Movement.” Their word “Patriotic” means not only “love the country,” but also “loyal to the Chinese Communist Party, loyal to the socialist government.” But there were still many clerics in both the Protestant church group and the Catholic church group refuse to take part in the movement, and subsequently, they were martyred or sent to prison. And just a decade afterwards, the so-called “Cultural Revolution” broke out and the Mao-cult had almost become a nation-wide madness, all the religions were banned, but Christianity had suffered more because of its highly political sensitivity. From the beginning of the 1980’s to now, all the five main religions are allowed to re-open in line with Deng Xiao-pin’s Reform and Opening-up policy, but even in this time, Christianity in China is still ordered to strictly observe the “Patriotic Principle” of the 1950’s and firmly obey the control of the Party and the government.

The Chinese Communist Party’s policy of religious administration and its special treatment to Christianity have offered the keynotes for us to understand the relations between church and state in China.

First, since all kinds of religious affairs in China are, to varying degrees, political sensitive, and those related to Christianity is at the utmost degree, so the relations between church and state has always been abnormally tense. Just a few years ago, some leaders of the National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement in China (TSPM) cooperatively published a big volume of collection of essays, titled as *“The Things of Past, if Not Forgotten, May Teach You about Things of Future: a Historical Review of Christianity Been Used as a Tool of Invasion of Imperialism.”*<sup>5)</sup> It signals that, in the eyes of TSPM church leaders, the highly political sensitivity of Christianity in China has remained the same, its ties to the Western power are to be cut thoroughly, and Christianity is still regarded as a kind of foreign religion in China today. But there are also occasionally statements by some TSPM church leaders declaring that the Chinese Christianity has got rid of the ugly title as “foreign religion” after the Patriotic Movement in 1950’s.<sup>6)</sup> It is a paradox and it reflects the status quo that Christianity has to constantly swear allegiance to the atheist government in order to survive under the socio-political environment. In the year of 2011, the Communist Party of China organized a big series of celebration activity for its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of foundation. Be it initiative in cooperation or forced to respond, most TSPM/CPA churches had held special assemblies to celebrate it and this kind of activities were called “Red Songs Singing for the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the Party’s Establishment.” The so called “Red Songs” are a series of political odes, such as “When the East is Red, the Sun Rises,” “No Communist Party, No New China,” etc.

But the rule is not that simple: if you are loyal to the Communist Party, you can pray and you can worship as much as you like. Many Chinese Christians feel difficulty to live out a real Christian life and at the meantime admit the Communist Party as “the great salvation star,” so they refuse to take part in the so-called “Patriotic Movement.” Consequently, both the Protestant church group and the Catholic Church in China are divided into two parts: a part of the state-approved churches and another part of “house churches” (often called for those in Protestant group) or “underground churches” (often called for those of Catholic tradition). The state-approved churches are sanctioned, registered and licensed by the government, and affiliated to TSPM (for those of Protestant group) or Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA); the house/underground churches are so named because they are unsanctioned, unregistered and unlicensed by the government, and not affiliated to TSPM or CPA. Therefore, they are treated by the government as a kind of disobedient social forces which are dangerous to the solidarity and stability of the whole society. When the Third Lausanne Congress was to open in October, 2010, Cape Town, the Preparing Committee had invited 200 house church leaders with formal membership but invited only 8 persons of TSPM churches as observers, because the house churches have become the majority of churches in China, and at the same time, the Three-Self churches were reluctant to sign the Lausanne Covenant. But the Chinese government was so strongly irritated by this practice of the World Evangelical Alliance that, in these days near the opening of the Congress, it used thousands of policemen to all the airports

in the country for preventing the invitees to depart for Cape Town. Consequently, all of them had been blocked from attending the Lausanne Congress. And what worth special mention is that, at the Second Lausanne Congress in 1989, Chinese delegation was also disallowed by the government from attending the event because of the diplomatic tension caused by Tian An Men incident. In the year of 2011, the Jasmine Revolution had spread to some countries of North Africa and Mideast. Under this kind of international environment, the Chinese government raised the alert level. As soon as the report came that there were small gatherings of pro-democracy demonstration taking to streets in Beijing, Shanghai and some other big cities, the Chinese government had responded very quickly and forcefully to the suspected demonstrations and had crushed them. Christianity is often considered as the natural ally of Democracy. So the ripple effect of political unrest had always spread to some suspected house churches, even though there is no solid evidence showing they have involved into those incidents. According to multiple media channels, there are hundreds and thousands of clergy and laity had been detained for questioning in the year of 2011.

Compared to Protestant churches, Chinese Catholic church faces even more complicated problems in church-state relations because it is overlapped with the Sino-Vatican diplomatic relation. Since the founding of PRC in 1949, Beijing and Vatican haven't established formal diplomatic relation yet. The major obstacle is the dispute on bishop ordination. Despite sometimes there were olive branches extended from Vatican, for instance, Pope Benedict XVI expressed the hope in a Letter to the Chinese Catholic Church in 2007, that "concrete forms of communication and cooperation between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China may soon be established."<sup>7)</sup> But the Chinese government's attitude of "being independent and autonomous on running the church" seems hardened. In recent a few years, several bishops were ordained against the wishes of Vatican, causing the Holy See deplored time and again, and even had to declare an excommunication to one of those illegally ordained bishop.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

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In the recent three decades, Chinese church has unprecedentedly got the rapid growing and developing, and it is synchronized with China's fast growing economic and political status in of the world. Sure, there are some relations between them, but the most significant reason lies in that the Chinese people are eager for moral and spiritual sources in the time when traditional culture has collapsed and Communist ideology is discredited. Many scholars expect Christianity will have a more great and glory future whether China's economy may keep growing or get stagnant in the future.

However, Chinese church has now faced many challenges.

In a certain period, the traditional Chinese style of church-state relations will keep working. Because of Its direct contradiction to the convention of modern international

communities, so it will certainly hamper the way of China's developing into an open, modern, liberal and democratic country. China has now become a country of enormous tension and cleavage caused by huge disparity between rich and poor, and extremely lack of moral value and spiritual sources. It will probably make China entrapped into an unstable situation, so the Communist government has been in the recent years making a great effort to maintain social stability. Such a socio-political environment is ominous to Christianity in China, especially when we take account of its utmost political sensitivity among other religions in China. Within the recent three decades, the Chinese church has met only some sporadic crackdowns in small scale, but in regard of the macro-historical past which had got previous cases such as the Chinese Rites Controversy, the Boxers Movement and the so-called "Cultural Revolution," it is quite uncertain whether some severe and sweeping persecutions will happen in the future.

Although there are some articles reporting optimistic news, for instance, BBC's correspondent Christopher Landau reported in his *China invests in confident Christians* that the communist government has committed to supporting the development of Christianity in China, and actually invested "millions of dollars...to encourage the development of religion in China."<sup>8)</sup> This kind of information may easily confuse outsiders on why does the atheist government give support to religions, especially when take into account that Christianity is his old enemy. So I feel obligated to point out that the Chinese government invests only to churches of TSPM or CPA, what the house/underground churches had been treated are harassment, confiscation and detention. The Chinese government has seemly been more and more skilled on appeasing the official TSPM/CPA churches by one hand and by the other, relentlessly cracking down the in-compliant house/underground churches. But only those with discerning eyes like Cardinal Zen Ze-Kiun can see through the trickery that "the government that once used threats and punishments has now improved its methods of persecution: money (gifts, cars, restructuring of residences) and honors (members of the People's Congress, or political advisory body at different levels, with meetings, lunches, dinners and all that follows)."<sup>9)</sup>

Compared to challenges from the outside, those existed in the inner side of the church are more critical. In China's vast and poor countryside, most of the churches, be it Protestant or Catholic, are composed largely by the hardly literate and old women. Their religious motivation is generally being cured from illness, exorcised of demons and satisfied by daily bread. The demographic quality of the urban house churches is much better, well-educated young men and women comprise the main part in this kind of churches, but generally speaking, few of them have really experienced revival of spiritual life like Euro-America Christians in the Great Awakening centuries did, most of them approach to Christianity just for a prosperity gospel or a cultural consumption. So as I think, the most prominent challenge from the inner side of the Chinese church is lacking of spiritual supplies.

On the facet of church administration, the situation are also very pressing. The state-

approved TSPM/CPA churches declare they have got rid of the missionary control and have got into a new period of independence, autonomy, “country-loving and church-loving,” but what they said by “self-governance” is actually “state-governance” since their clergy system is controlled by the atheist government. So it was no wonder they cannot efficiently administrate their churches in line with doctrine and getting more and more like a kind of special government institute. On the other side, the Protestant house churches are also facing serious challenges in church governance. Not like the Catholic underground churches governed by bishops and priests appointed by Vatican, the Protestant house churches are independently organized by leaders from very different background. And sometimes, because they cannot have legal status to come out under the public scrutiny, some disguised prophets, false “Christs,” and even criminals have also established and developed their so-called “churches.” Due to difficulty to distinguish the true ones from the false, some Chinese people don’t think Christianity has so good reputation as said by others or in books. Since the 1980’s when Chinese government adopted the reform and opening-up policy, many heretical cults (sometimes called “New Religious Movements”) have emerged in China, their doctrine are mixtures of distorted bible stories, sorceries, witchcrafts and propaganda of deifying their leaders, and some of them even commit criminal offences.

Furthermore, theological construction may probably be the innermost challenge of the Chinese church. In the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were a few theologians like T. C. Chao (1888-1979) struggled in blending Christianity and Chinese culture. Since the founding of PRC in 1949, the traditional Chinese culture has been fading away quickly and irretrievably, so the Chinese theological thinking has lost its paradigm and what is for most of the churches leaders and scholars to think about is but how to cooperate with the Communist government. Needless to say, this way doesn’t lead to real theology. However, even not for in this kind of socio-political environment, the construction of mature Chinese theology cannot be accomplished in one or two generation because the task is so hard and huge, and the difference between Chinese history and culture and those of the Western world is vast. So there is a long way to go for the Chinese church to have its great thinkers and leaders.

But as is often said, opportunities always coexist with challenges. The opportunities of Chinese church may also come from both the inner side and the outer side.

From the outer side, the most significant opportunity exists in the macro socio-political environment of China, just as the biggest challenge comes from it too. China is irreversibly on the way of reform and opening-up and this way is leading to the end of religious freedom and legal administration of religious affairs. Despite the unique church-state relation has been the primary challenge of Christianity in China, on another side, this kind of relation implies that China cannot keep pace with modern world and refers that the Chinese society contains in itself the requirement to keep promoting reform and opening-up policy.

And, it is also a great opportunity that more and more people in Chinese intellectual and

cultural circles begin to understand and support Christianity. In Chinese social science research field, one of interesting facts is that the Institute of World Religions (IWR, founded in 1964) established before its upper level organ –the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS, found in 1977), and the main function of IWR has changed from Marxist religion-critiquing to academic research of world religions. Up to now, the department of Christian Studies of IWR has sponsored fifteen annual and national-wide conferences. Research on Christianity has also been an important branch of Chinese academic field of social science. According to a report of Christianity Today, 1,300 Christian books are now publicly and legally available, and most of them are published and distributed within the recent three decades.<sup>10</sup> In the Chinese cultural circle, China Philharmonic Orchestra had ever contributed a special concert for Pope Benedict XVI in April, 2008, and this event had once been considered as a milestone between Beijing and Vatican. Just as said by its conductor Yu Long, music travels beyond all boundaries, it is reasonable to believe that Christianity will benefit more from cultural communication between China and the West in the future.

Further, opportunity is also embodied in that the fast growth of Christianity in China has warmly greeted by international and domestic human rights agencies, pro-democracy organizations and some relevant NGOs. After the Tian An Men incident in 1989, those exiled pro-democracy activists have continued to make influence from abroad, and within the Great-wall, Chinese intellectual class has began to realize the social problem of China in human rights and legal institution aspects and a group of dissidents has emerged arduously on the Chinese socio-political stage. Christianity has never been a political movement itself, but its doctrine about social justice and human being's ultimate value is always the catalyst of socio-political changes. For this reason, China Aid Association, a famous human rights agency headquartered in America, has helped improve human rights condition and religious freedom in China in many cases and its tenacity and prowess has made it a serious challenger to the Chinese government. Another example I would like to mention here should be the Pu Shi Institute for Social Science, an independent, nonprofit and non-governmental think tank which is established in 1999, and its purpose is "Promoting Freedom of Belief within the Framework of Rule of Law." It has set a well-managed website served as a public forum and a news center for nearly all the important religious research activities. And since 2010, it has hosted three summer training programs (I had ever attended the first one) in Beijing, titled by "Religion and Rule of Law," which had benefited more than two hundred scholars, lawyers and officials.

But the opportunities from inner side are more important and worth concern. In this regard, I would like to invite you pay more attention to the Chinese Protestant house churches.

First, unregistered house churches have become the majority in the Chinese Protestant church group and the main part of Catholic churches and their bishops recognize the authority of the Vatican, it means the Chinese church has been getting less controlled by the atheist government, but more and closer affiliated to the Universal Church. Although both the TSPM

churches and the CPA churches have still retained ties with some international Christian communities, they have already lost the major representation of the Chinese church.

Second, the population number and growing speed of urban house churches has overrun those of rural house churches, and the majority of the urban house church adherents are young people. In the recent three decades, China has experienced a rapid urbanization process as hundreds of millions of young people in the countryside move to cities as migrant workers or college students. According to the report of National Bureau of Statistics, China's urban population had at the first time exceeded the rural population in 2011.<sup>11)</sup> This social and economic change has brought a significant influence to Christianity in China. Despite of being short of accurate statistic data, I estimate that the rural house churches had made up the majority of Chinese Protestant church group until the end of last century, and the congregation of them were then largely comprised of underprivileged old women in the vast countryside.<sup>12)</sup>

Furthermore, on the way of developing their organization, the house churches are busy in theological construction as well. In recent years, a kind of theological schools with a special Chinese feature—which means teaching both the seminar classes and catechism classes synchronously—have sprung up in some big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Xi'an. So the pastoral workers in house churches grow very fast. Besides this kind of traditional theological institutes, dozens of online seminaries are supplying life-long theological education for tens of thousands of house church workers as well.

And there is also a newly emerged phenomenon that the normalization of church governance is on the way pushing forward in Chinese house churches. As early as in the 1980's, the TSPM churches leaders had declared that the Chinese Protestant churches had united and get into a post-denominational period. It seems that this declaration can only represent their one-side will. At present, we have already seen Shouwan church (Beijing), Blessings of Autumn Rain Church (Chengdu) and some other house churches have adopted Presbyterianism. Are there going to be some church adopted Episcopalism or Congregationalism? Most probably, I think.

At last, Please allow me to express my conclusion and also my belief that what Pope John Paul II emphasized in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Asia" and Pope Benedict XVI reminded in his Letter to Chinese Christian: the new evangelization demands the proclamation of the Gospel to modern man, with a keen awareness that, just as during the first Christian millennium the Cross was planted in Europe and during the second in the American continent and in Africa, so during the third millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in the vast and vibrant Asian continent, must come true.<sup>13)</sup>

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Notes

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