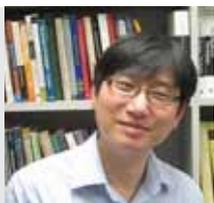




Church Leadership in China, 1982–2012

Despite persecution during the Cultural Revolution, the church in China has survived and now experiences remarkable growth. There are, however, not enough trained church leaders to meet the demands of local congregations. It is a problem that needs to be addressed by the entire Chinese church.



Wai Luen Kwok

Wai Luen Kwok is Research Assistant Professor at the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University.

Christianity is growing rapidly in China. This is a big surprise, if not a miracle. According to the Chinese government's statistics, the number of the Protestant Christians increased nearly eightfold between 1982 and 2010. In 1982 there were approximately 3 million Protestant Christians in China. In 2010 the Chinese government reported that there were more than 23 million Protestant Christians in the country. This represents 1.8 per cent of the total population of China. From the statistics, we know that more than 73 per cent of the believers came to the Christian faith after 1993.¹

However, this rapid expansion is a rebirth rather than a development of the Chinese church. The Chinese government banned all religious organisations and activities during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Believers were subjected to humiliation and were even arrested and imprisoned and sometimes tortured for their faith. Bibles were destroyed and churches closed down, sometimes looted and destroyed. Pastors, teachers and leaders were laid off and sent to prisons, farms or factories.

House Churches and their Leaders

Despite the fear of persecution by the state authorities, some Chinese Christians continued to spread the Christian gospel among their compatriots. These evangelists were devoted laypeople with little or no theological training, who worked mainly in the rural areas of Zhejiang, Anhui, Hubei, Fujian and Henan provinces, which were under less political control than the cities. Such was the success of their work a number

of congregations were founded. This was the beginning of the 'rural house church' movement.

The lay evangelists naturally became the leaders of congregations. Characteristically these new leaders were zealous in saving people's souls, had a very good knowledge in the biblical passages and stories, had spiritual gifts of healing and exorcism, and were able to pray long and emotional prayers. They mostly came from a farming background, which meant they were able to visit different congregations and hold revival meetings during the less busy season on their farms. The leaders trained their members using the basic fundamentalist theological writings and biblical commentaries that were published before 1949. From time to time, they were persecuted and imprisoned by the government.²

Some important former church leaders were released in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the most eminent examples being Wang Mingdao in Shanghai, Xie Moshan in Beijing, Yang Xinfei in Xiamen and Lin Xiangao in Guangzhou. They established 'house churches' in their homes but still, occasionally, faced the danger of imprisonment. Compared to the rural church leaders, these urban church leaders were well educated (Xie and Lin had been educated in seminaries; Yang had college education; Wang was a schoolteacher before he became a church minister) and their exegesis, sermons and pastoral writings soon became important resources for discipleship and leadership training in many house churches in 1980s and 1990s. At that time, the Western seminary model of educating new leaders, which was adopted by the 'Three-Self Church', was been distrusted by the house churches because it was seen

as the seedbed of theological modernism/liberalism. It was suspected that such a model of training would corrupt young, devoted minds.³ Spirituality rather than

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1. Yongpeng Xiao (ed.), *Shift from Confrontation to Dialogue: Notes of Dialogue Between Ye Xiaowen and Delegation from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (Beijing, 2005), p. 74; Ze Jin and Yonghui Qiu, (eds), *Annual Report on China's Religions* (Beijing, 2011), pp. 191–2.

2. Ka-Lun Leung, *The rural churches of Mainland China since 1978* (Hong Kong, 1999), p. 85.

3. Bian Ji Bu, 'The Future Directions of Chinese Theological Education', *Mai Zhong*, April 2008, pp. 47–8; Bian Ji Bu, 'When Piety meets Theology', *Church China* 2011, pp. 41–2.

4. Peng Liu, *Studies in the Problem of House Church in China* (Beijing, 2009), p. 50.

5. Dongri Wu, 'The Theological Education of Chinese Church', *Sheng Shan Wang* 3 June 2009, www.shengshan.org/article/henxueyantao/20090603/511.html.

6. Nicola Davison, 'Chinese Christianity will not be crushed', *The Guardian* 24 May 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/may/24/chinese-christianity-underground.

7. Because these churches are under the dual umbrella of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and The China

theology was considered the most important subject in leadership training so the 'training classes' (*Pei Xue Ban*) were semi-structural and non-academic, focusing on the scriptural contents and spiritual discipleship. This was the ideal of, for example, the Chinese Christian Institute of Spirituality, which was founded in 1936 by Chinese Presbyterian theologian Reverend Dr Jia Yuming.

Most of the leaders in the house churches of that time would have thought of themselves as 'Presbyterian' in terms of church polity. However, researchers have discovered that the church polity structure and leadership style was more paternalistic and authoritarian in essence. New leaders of the church were, and still are, selected by the 'founding-fathers', rather than being elected by the wider church. In some areas (e.g. Zhejiang), ordained and full-time pastors were thought to be unspiritual if they received stipends from the church for their work.⁴

Without a unified national organisation to govern all the local churches, this paternalistic and authoritarian, top-down leadership structure continues today, often to the exclusion of some significant groups of people. Women, for example, can struggle to become house church leaders. If women were involved in the founding of a particular congregation then they may have more opportunities to enter the top leadership, but on the whole men continue to dominate the leadership and decision-making roles.

From 2000 onwards, the house church movement has experienced rapid changes. After becoming a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001, China became more open, not only in terms of its economy but also with regard to the government's attitude towards religion. Foreign Christian students, teachers, businessmen, entrepreneurs and professionals were allowed into China and they helped spread the Christian message amongst the urban Chinese. At the same time, a number of overseas Chinese students became Christians when they studied abroad. These new converts founded a new type of 'house church', the 'emerging urban house church', comprising of students, professionals and entrepreneurs. Although these 'emerging urban house churches' represent only a small proportion of the Christian population in China, they are influential because their members are well educated and come from professional backgrounds. Emerging urban house churches usually have full-time, ordained pastors and a clear administrative and leadership

structure that includes deacons and elders. Some churches have even written their own administration manuals for church governance. They tend to identify themselves with Western confessional counterparts (e.g. Reformed, charismatic, evangelical, etc.) that have similar theological and ecclesiastical standards to their own.

The leaders of the 'emerging urban house churches' recognise the importance of spirituality and charismatic gifts but, unlike their predecessors in the house church movement, these new leaders also understand the importance of theological training. They want to establish formal theological training institutions⁵ and are sending young leaders to Singapore, Korea and the United States to prepare them to be future theological teachers. Senior leaders are travelling to seminaries in Hong Kong and Singapore to learn about the administrative structures, curriculum planning and student life arrangements as they prepare to develop their own theological institutions. In some cities, the churches co-organise theological programmes with overseas seminaries for better teaching resources and credentials.

Although the Chinese government is far more tolerant of religious activity, it still on occasions tries to restrict the activities of some house churches. Some church leaders are still persecuted and are prosecuted, arrested, or sentenced by the government. In 2008, twenty-one pastors of house churches in Shandong Province were sent to labour camps, which was the largest sentencing of house church leaders in a quarter of a century. And, more recently in April 2011, one well-known recent senior pastor, Reverend Jin Tianming, of Shouwang Church in Beijing, one of city's largest 'underground' churches, was put under house arrest following a crackdown on the unregistered congregation.⁶ He is still detained by the authorities.

Three-Self Church and their Leaders

As we have seen, the Cultural Revolution in China drove all Christian worship underground for fear of persecution. To counter this growing trend of 'unregistered meetings', the government, after the implementation of the 'reform and opening-up' (*Gaige Kaifang*) policy, officially allowed churches to reopen in 1979, after 13 years of nonexistence, under the control of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.⁷ The movement had begun formally in 1954 to promote a strategy of 'self-governance, self-support and self-propagation' in order to remove foreign influences from the Chinese churches and to assure the communist government that the churches would be patriotic to the newly established People's Republic of China.

In 1980 the China Christian Council was founded as an umbrella organisation for all Protestant churches in China that focuses on the internal management and affairs of the Church. Though it is a top-down structure, which starts from the national level to the provincial and finally the county/city level; the upper level of these two organisations is only in a 'guiding relationship' with the

lower levels. Rather, the Religious Affairs Administration of the local governments has a 'leading relationship' with The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council of the same administrative level. It explicitly suggests that the government is exerting its leadership over the churches.⁸

When the Three-Self Church was officially reopened in 1979, government officials persuaded former pastors and church ministers to return to their posts. The following year, Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (NUTS) was reopened for training the next generation of leaders. Although by 2008, over 5,000 pastors had been trained in the various regional and provincial seminaries opened to meet the demand,⁹ today there is still a lack of manpower and resources within the church. Both men and women are being trained but the seminaries cannot meet the demands of fast-growing congregations. The pastor-lay Christian ratio is 1:1000 in many cases. In order to share the workloads of pastors and ministers, authority is more decentralised than in the house churches, with deacons and elders participating in administration and leadership.

Questions remain over the relevance of the leadership training pastors of the Three-Self Church are given. Compared to the training that house church leaders receive, some Christians think the Three-Self curriculum is irrelevant to the Christian life and is weak in terms of spiritual formation and the development of Christian character. It is also thought to be too political and not pastoral enough (ironically, some government officials have been critical of the training because it is not patriotic enough).¹⁰ In response to such criticisms, a series of conferences have been organised in recent years to consider the future directions and developments of theological education within the church. One may expect some improvements could be made in the near future.¹¹

One initiative has recently been launched. At the end of September the China Christian Council and the National Committee of the TSPM announced a theological exchange campaign to strengthen theological thinking. According to Gao Feng, the President of the China Christian Council, the campaign, which will run from 2013 to 2017, 'aims to increase a sense of identification for both pastors and believers and encourage priests and church volunteers to extract morals that are consistent with the times from the Bible, religious doctrines and the traditions of churches in order to encourage believers to make more contributions to the country's economic development, social harmony and cultural prosperity.'

Wang Zuoan, director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, described the campaign as a 'major event' in the construction of Chinese Christian theology. Not surprisingly, he stressed that Christianity should be compatible with the country's socialist society. Notably, Wang Zuoan put politics first and belief second in the task of improving Christians. He urged the campaign to make concrete efforts to boost Chinese

Christians' qualities concerning politics, belief, law and society.

What impact such a campaign will have, time will tell, but it does signify that the Chinese government takes

the issue of leadership needs to be addressed by the entire Chinese church if Christianity is to continue to blossom

religion seriously and that it recognises that Christianity can have a positive role in society.

Although under-resourced, we find that many pastors within the Three-Self Church are devoted to their ministries and have gained the respect of their congregations. They often prove to be good preachers and decent biblical teachers who have a pastoral heart for the communities that they serve.

Conclusion

After 30 years of development, as the Chinese economy has flourished and personal freedoms have increased, Christianity has started to thrive. Even conservative estimates of the number of Christians in China show that there are more believers than Communist Party members. This rapid growth, which looks set to continue over the coming decades, presents a major challenge for both the official Church and the house church movement in China because the growth of the church is outpacing its resources. There are not enough trained pastors to lead the church, either in the official Three-Self Church or the unofficial, independent house/urban church movement. Many places at seminaries and Bible schools exist to help all Christian leaders who need training, but space is limited, and many lay pastors, especially in rural areas, simply cannot afford the training.

The issue of leadership needs to be addressed by the entire Chinese church if Christianity is to continue to blossom. There needs to be a continued commitment to the training of leaders in increasing numbers, otherwise there is a real danger that the church will stagnate and fail in its mission to the wider Chinese society.

Whether the house church movement is allowed to respond to this pressing need remains the big question. So far the Chinese government has largely tolerated these technically illegal gatherings. Whether it continues to do remains to be seen. Fearing an allegiance to something other than China, the state authorities may take a tougher stance on house churches in the future.

Christian Council, they were coined as the 'Three Self Church' in distinguished with the 'house' churches.

8. Fuk-tsang Ying, 'Civil Organizations and Chinese Christianity', *Er Shi Yi Shi Ji* 114 (August 2009), p. 28.

9. Qinghua Yue, 'The Theological and Cultural Missions of Chinese Theological Education', *Tian Feng* October 2008, p. 33.

10. Congyou Wang, 'The Summary of The Symposium of Theological Education and Theology Development', *Tian Feng* November 2008, 25; Yilu Chen, 'Cultivate Theological Students with Heart', *Tian Feng*, September 2009, p. 15; Dingxin Xu, 'The Keys to have a Good Operation in Jinling [Theological Seminary] are insisting the Right Educational Principle and Theological Direction', *Jinling Shenxue Zhi* 38-41 (June 2000), p. 25.

11. See *The Construction of Theological Education and Theology* (Shanghai, 2009).