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# CHINA'S PROTESTANTS



A MUSTARD SEED FOR  
MORAL RENEWAL?

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The number of religious believers in China continues to grow almost exponentially, far outpacing population growth.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, vague and unchanging official estimates, which since 1994 have reported “over 100 million faithful” in the country, reflect the government’s tendency to mask the rapid growth evident on the ground.<sup>2</sup> In February 2007, for the first time, the official media reported on an academic challenge to these earlier figures. Scholars in Shanghai had made very rough projections based on a limited survey, suggesting that there were up to 40 million Protestants in China among a total of 300 million religious adherents (not including estimated adherents of informal popular religions or “folk faiths”).<sup>3</sup>

Of the officially tolerated faiths, Christianity has grown at the fastest pace. There were fewer than 1 million Protestants and over 4 million Catholics in 1949—a little over 1 percent of China’s total population of 450 million. By 1965, there were far fewer practicing Christians, of course, as Mao Zedong pursued his policy of escalating persecution. Yet, by 1980, the total was back up to 4 million and growing. As of 2005, Christians were approaching 5 percent of the population, four-fifths of them Protestants, all with virtually no public support or access to China’s mass media—and with the majority not registered with the government. Projections for 2020 show even more growth, with a jump to 10 percent or even more.<sup>4</sup> Unregistered Christians may be the largest autonomous social group in China.

The revival and growth in the number of Protestants in the cities in the 1990s followed the resurgence of rural “house churches” in the 1980s. Protestants are no longer primarily female, elderly, and illiterate, but include men, youth, and members of the educated middle class. Moreover, there are new streams within the Protestant faith itself, including factions within state-sanctioned church organizations, house church networks that have become quasi denominations, ethnic churches (such as those in Chinese-Korean communities), and networks of urban fellowship groups that have grown out of campus-based Bible study groups in China or North America.

There is also reduced hostility within China to Christianity. Christian ministries working in the United States and in China note in particular that the so-called ’80s generation is free of the ideological prejudice against Christianity that had, in the past, cast the faith as a tool of imperialism. Perhaps the most important shift in attitudes has occurred among China’s opinion-shapers—the social, economic, and even political elites. Take, for example, the case of one individual I interviewed recently—the granddaughter and daughter of dedicated Chinese Communist officials, who, along with her husband, holds a state post dealing with issues in international law. When asked to recommend a subject for biographical research on China’s diplomats, she and her husband immediately suggested several figures whose Christian faith had given them courage to disobey orders and refuse to sign the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, under which China ceded territory to Japan. Similarly, the daughter of a military leader asked me for advice on a new project she was engaged in, a series of translated biographies of missionaries to China. Explaining her interest in the topic, she said, “I want to find out why so many of my friends have been telling me ‘*wo xin jiao*.’” This phrase literally means “I believe in religion” but is now understood to mean “I’m a Protestant Christian.” When asked whether the government might “rehabilitate” the missionary era, she replied that “it doesn’t matter. The public has already done so.”<sup>5</sup>

Globalization has also contributed to social diversity and competition in China’s cultural sphere. As sociologist Peter Berger noted in a three-year study of contemporary culture in ten countries, including China, globalization has produced something akin to a “cultural earthquake.”<sup>6</sup> State resistance is often difficult because today’s global culture allows social movements to cross borders easily, at times revealing fissures in the Chinese government’s once-impervious antireligious stance. The internal and transnational mobility of the Chinese people—and of the ideas they carry, both to and from China—have become the seedbed for novelty within Chinese society.<sup>7</sup> Pioneering research on the

emerging religious “markets” in China by sociologist Fenggang Yang and others reveals the flux as both state and social actors seek to “modernize” competing belief systems to keep up with new conditions and needs within China.<sup>8</sup> As one might expect in times of such rapid and radical social transformation, China’s citizens are seeking new sources of meaning for their lives and new purpose for the communities they live in.

### **Back to the Future**

An earlier phase of globalization produced the golden age of Chinese Protestantism, a period lasting from roughly 1900 to 1925.<sup>9</sup> As a result of new technology and growth in international trade, a tiny middle class sprang up in China’s coastal cities. The Chinese were introduced to the modern professions of journalism, medicine, education, law, industry, and military affairs, along with Western-style education, in the mission schools. In addition, late Victorian Britain and Progressive-era America provided models for moral renovation and social reform designed to address the challenges of industrialization.<sup>10</sup> Mission agencies and Chinese churches were active in campaigns to end practices such as foot-binding, concubinage, trade in coolie labor, and opium abuse. Big cities like Shanghai and Tianjin had hundreds of American-style voluntary associations of all kinds, including sports, professional, religious, and charitable ones. The YMCA in particular was a major player in developing China’s civic sector.

All in all, there was growing receptivity to Christianity within China as a movement that could help renew public morality and build an equitable modern social order. With the 1911 Xinhai Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen, a Christian medical doctor, and his many Christian associates, Protestants became hopeful that the “Christianization” of culture and society might be received as the solution to China’s problems.

During the 1930s and 1940s, however, under the combined pressures of economic depression, civil war, and war with Japan, the long-term reform agenda of Chinese “national renewal” gave way to

urgent political-military mobilization for the sake of “national salvation.” In turn, for both the Nationalists and Communists, revolutionary Leninist-style party rule over both China’s civil society and economy became the norm.

Nevertheless, the era of Christian missions undoubtedly contributed to the recent revival of Christianity within China. As local communities and institutions are dusting off long-suppressed histories in time for centennial celebrations, there is more leeway to acknowledge the missionary roots of many hospitals and universities. Local congregations and schools are inviting the descendants of missionary founders to come back to China to celebrate these anniversaries, while Chinese intellectuals are more willing to explore and write about the pre-1949 period. And, finally, one is seeing a rise in the number of Chinese, especially among retirees no longer active in state jobs, reconnecting with their personal Christian heritages.

### **The Third Church**

Younger and better-educated leaders are rising in both the older, official “patriotic” churches and unregistered house churches. These leaders seem more willing to set aside old animosities that reflected differences of doctrine dating to the fundamentalist-liberal controversy of the early twentieth century—a pivotal doctrinal debate among Protestant groups in the United States, which, as a result of competing missionary efforts, eventually manifested itself in China’s emerging Protestant community. The new crop of leaders is also less likely to call attention to the differences in culture between the elite, urban, “Confucian” Christians and less-educated, rural “folk” Christians. At the same time, a “third church” is growing rapidly in the cities, marked by an increase in middle-class fellowship groups that identify neither with the registered churches nor with historic house churches. Although networking keeps them in touch with both, they appear committed to the “house church” model of the early church from Roman times. Members were typically converted

after attending university-based Bible studies either in the United States or in China. Through the Bible study groups, Chinese Christians provide mutual support and focus on applying the principles of Christian faith in their professional and personal lives.

Most of the older house churches and younger urban fellowship groups are consciously apolitical in their goals and activities. Yet the implications of what it means to be apolitical have shifted somewhat; these communities and churches no longer see themselves simply as operating “underground.” As one leader of an urban house church network recently argued, “the church has broken from its underground status and placed its lamp on a lamp stand.”<sup>11</sup> Although they rarely confront state authorities directly, the churches carry out public activities—holding open seminars, publishing materials, renting space for offices and events, and disseminating information on the Internet. According to the same church leader, the responsibility of the churches as institutions is not to engage in social reform for “national salvation” or promote political activism in support of civil rights—although individual Christians might be called to do either or both. Rather, the focus should be on developing a cooperative community of faith that seeks cultural renewal through teaching everyday values—especially marriage and family values—and through charitable ministries.<sup>12</sup>

This younger generation of Protestants is highly networked for resources and cooperation, both in China and overseas. Overseas groups work directly with both registered and unregistered groups at the local level, bypassing central and even provincial state-sponsored religious hierarchies. The dearth of leadership training available in China’s single national seminary and its several dozen sanctioned Bible colleges has created a strong demand for informal “field seminaries” and lay leadership training; new online resources from the burgeoning “virtual” Chinese Christian community; and Chinese-language seminaries in Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and North America. Overseas Chinese Christian communities are also growing—there are more than eighty Mandarin-speaking Chinese

churches in Vancouver, British Columbia, for example—which has in turn abetted the high conversion rate among mainland Chinese living and studying overseas. Many of these communities are in communication and partnership with churches in China; perhaps 80 percent of Hong Kong churches have evangelistic, training, or social service programs on the mainland.<sup>13</sup>

### Christianity’s Growing Reach

It still is rare to observe public manifestations of Christianity in China other than crosses on church buildings symbolizing the presence of a registered congregation. Most Christian groups—like the majority of all nonprofit organizations in China—are not members of the government-sanctioned associations and thus are not registered with the relevant authorities. Nevertheless, most Christian groups no longer operate in strict secrecy. They meet in rural farmyards, urban apartments, factories, restaurants, or rented space in commercial or even state facilities. Church summer camps and weekend retreats are popular, too. A key result of this quasi religious freedom is that Christianity has begun to reach into different sectors and levels of society. The church has become a significant part of China’s unofficial “second society,” a concept introduced by sociologist Elemér Hankiss in the context of Communist Hungary to describe the social and economic activities thriving beyond the immediate control of the state and its official organs. Indeed, the church’s influence extends far beyond the visible religious activities and memberships within the officially sanctioned churches.<sup>14</sup>

**Education.** In the 1980s, Chinese scholars became interested in Christianity as what they perceived to be the cultural basis for American power and influence, and thus a potential source for social cohesion and cultural “soft power” within China. By the late 1990s, university humanities departments had spawned nearly one hundred religious studies centers or institutes. This interest in religion has since spilled over into the social sciences, where scholars

have begun to look at religion in China, not just religion elsewhere. (A few academics have openly acknowledged becoming Christian but, in order to retain their jobs, have not become baptized members of organized religious groups.)

Scholars of religion have taken the lead in bringing discussion of religion into the public square. One leading expert on religious policy has sponsored conferences on religion and law and religion and national security. Another nationally known scholar of Christianity has openly challenged the concepts of a “patriotic” national church, a state “civil religion,” and national “cultural security” as dangerous anachronisms in the global era.<sup>15</sup>

Predictably, state officials have entered the arena with a heavily funded expansion of Marxist studies and a pilot moral education program in public primary and secondary schools in sixty Chinese cities based on a combination of classic Confucian, Taoist, and socialist texts. But in some cases—including in Shanghai—local educators have modified the programs’ curricula to include readings from the Bible. Similarly, enterprising university departments offer intensive ethics and management courses for business leaders that include Buddhist and Christian materials along with Confucian and Taoist readings.<sup>16</sup>

**Nonprofit Sector.** Protestants are beginning to surface more publicly in charity work. International faith-based organizations such as World Vision began disaster relief and antipoverty work, especially in western China, in the 1980s, and they expanded their programs in the 1990s despite continuing difficulties in registering and fundraising in China. There is also a growing number of Chinese faith-based nonprofits that run clinics, homes for the elderly, orphanages, and social centers. Most are small, with uncertain legal status and limited capacity; yet many have also established good working relationships with local authorities, who are stretched to provide similar services. The sole national Protestant “GONGO”—that is, a government-sanctioned NGO—the Amity Foundation in Nanjing, has become an active leader in charity circles,

known for its efficient management and effective projects, largely with overseas funds. Its Catholic counterpart, Beifang Jinde Social Service Center in Hebei Province, is also growing in status and reach. With the increased level of operations of these faith-based organizations, the official churches are now being encouraged to get involved directly in social service provision.<sup>17</sup>

**Business Sector.** In the past few years, glossy mainland journals targeting the business sector have included as their cover stories testimonies from several Christian millionaires about their faith—certainly a novel development. In summer 2006, American journalist and social commentator Marvin Olasky traveled through China and interviewed dozens of Christian CEOs.<sup>18</sup> Many had converted while traveling or studying overseas or through the influence of family or friends who had been overseas. Their fellowship groups and Christianity-influenced management training courses use materials from the Internet or DVDs. Retreats for CEOs and spouses centered on marriage and family relationships have become popular. Many of the CEOs have started philanthropic projects, often in support of poor rural teachers and students.

**The Legal Sector.** A growing number of Protestants are surfacing in the legal profession, starting with students but including both law professors and practicing lawyers. They avoid “street politics” in favor of working through the courts in an effort to help build a new legal culture within China.<sup>19</sup> For many, inspiration comes from the Christian principles of non-violent resistance of Martin Luther King Jr., whose life story has been publicized for decades in China.<sup>20</sup>

In many cases, these Christian lawyers have been advocates for marginal groups suffering from abuses of official power. They have defended the right of free association, bringing lawsuits on behalf of unregistered civic groups and organizing the Ark Church in Beijing and an Association of Human Rights Attorneys for Chinese Christians in 2005. They have also defended various local leaders of a national alliance of

Chinese house churches.<sup>21</sup> The most well-known Christian lawyer, Gao Zhisheng, was even rated by the Ministry of Justice as one of the country's top ten lawyers at one point. But after he initiated lawsuits on a wide range of sensitive matters, his law practice was shut down for alleged technical violations, just prior to President Bush's visit to Beijing in early 2006.<sup>22</sup>

One common grievance with the greatest potential to bring together disaffected groups is the defense of property rights. The 2003 amendments to the Chinese constitution created, at least on paper, new rights in this area and a new basis for challenging local governments' practice of arbitrarily expropriating property. In every locality, there are religious properties nationalized in the 1950s that have not yet been returned to their owners in contravention of 1982 directives.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, local officials have simply taken religious property that had been previously returned to registered congregations.<sup>24</sup> In July 2006, more than three thousand Christians in a suburb of Hangzhou, Zhejiang, clashed with thousands of military police over the demolition of a nearly completed sanctuary being built on land owned privately by a church member. With a number of their members in detention, congregation leaders retained prominent legal advocates from Beijing to defend their cause and called for an independent international investigation by human rights organizations and the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. By December 2006, eight congregants, including the church's pastor, had received prison sentences ranging from one to three years.<sup>25</sup>

**Prodemocracy Circles.** Christians also have influence within China's small circle of democrats, which includes Tiananmen dissidents living in exile overseas.<sup>26</sup> There are also prominent Roman Catholics active in politics in Hong Kong, China's de facto frontier for democratization.<sup>27</sup> In Beijing, a number of legal advocates, environmental activists, and critical writers and journalists are Protestants. Wang Yi and Yu Jie, founders of the Chinese branch of the international writer's association PEN, were among the handful of fifty "public intellectuals" listed in

2004 who were subsequently banned from publishing in China. Yu Jie had expressed his admiration for peaceful democratic change in Taiwan and Hong Kong and called for the removal of Mao's portrait from Tiananmen Square; he also had argued for a process of national reconciliation before Beijing hosts the Olympics this summer.<sup>28</sup> Along with lawyer Li Baiguang, the two met with President Bush privately at the White House in May 2006 to discuss matters of faith.<sup>29</sup>

### The State and Religion

China's one-party state still clings tightly to its role as China's moral arbiter. The 1982 constitution and central directive on religion are still in force and define freedom of religion narrowly; there is freedom of "religious belief" but not religious practice, which is restricted to the narrow private sphere of the home, family, or state-authorized places of worship. The five "patriotic" religious associations—all within the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)—are viewed as social organizations serving members only with a limited writ of activities. For example, there is only one national Protestant magazine and one national Protestant publishing house, which produce materials for distribution in special members-only channels.

The top-down central command system is a variant of state corporatism that imposes indirect party control over social organizations through ostensibly independent "mass" associations. Matters involving religious and ethnic minorities are dealt with in the same bureau or section, sustaining a mindset that religious rights are only for historical religious minority communities, not for all citizens. Bureaucratic stagnation is evident in the Soviet-style structure and policies of the Communist Party's United Front Department and its subordinate government bureaus, including SARA.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, central authorities delegated the management of religion to local authorities, but the scale of local corruption and abuse of power has led Beijing to reassert its authority in recent

years. Current religious policy was set forth at a decennial party conference on religious affairs in December 2001, with implementing regulations going into effect in March 2005.<sup>31</sup> These are part of a larger set of regulations—including new tax and audit requirements—on foundations, charities, membership-based social organizations, and non-profit service providers.

Additionally, in the wake of the democratic “color revolutions” in former Soviet states, China’s leaders have in recent years paid greater attention to foreign NGOs and Chinese social organizations that were not registered with the state. As an example, many faith-based international NGOs that had previously been praised for their charitable work have come under investigation and been pressured to operate within the religious affairs system. Meanwhile, at least one hundred foreign Christians working in the business or education sectors have lost their visa status. This distinctly illiberal trend was reflected in the July 2006 pronouncements by the SARA director, who stressed that the government must “properly guide” the “more than 100 million faithful” to restrain their “negative elements,” to help them adapt to the “socialist mainstream” of society, and to “direct them to practice faith rightly.” Religious groups, not errant officials, were portrayed as the obstacles to the goal of building a “harmonious society.” State-directed political campaigns were to continue reconstructing religious doctrine and management to serve state goals of increasing social services, protecting the environment, and maintaining social stability.<sup>32</sup>

Relatively moderate remarks by President Hu Jintao have surfaced recently, standing out amid increased scrutiny of religious activities. During a Politburo “study session” on religion in mid-December 2007—which was addressed by experts on Confucianism and Christianity—Hu made no direct reference to the failings of religious groups and did not warn of dangers from foreign religious “infiltrators.” Instead, he indicated that government religious officials needed to improve their understanding, respect, and use of lawful means. The meeting followed the first mention of religious policy in an

amendment to the party’s constitution.<sup>33</sup> But both the amendment and Hu’s comments were vague, and, like so many that temporarily raised hopes in the past, they may prove to be a mere public relations pose prior to the Olympics. In short, despite the fact that Chinese authorities can no longer ignore the rapid growth of Christianity—especially Protestant Christianity—it remains unclear how they intend to manage or assimilate it as a policy matter. As a result, the various elements of the churches and church-related organizations, especially those not registered, face a fluid and insecure legal environment.

### **Chinese Christianity and the Prospects for Civic Renewal**

Could Protestantism blossom as one source of a new public morality in China? Could it become a potential “school of liberty” as Christian groups and organizations experiment with grassroots efforts in education, social services, and self-governance? Protestants will remain a minority in China, making up some 5–10 percent of the population in the decade ahead. But perhaps this seed can grow into something with far greater impact than sheer numbers would predict. Today, China faces a situation in which it lacks other widely accepted and effective moralizing agents. The family, village, and neighborhood all have been seriously weakened, first by socialism and then by urbanization; socialist values are seriously discredited; Confucianism as a philosophy lacks an organized mass base; and variants of Buddhism and folk religion have not proved to be modernizing agents.

This gap in civic education of course is not news to Chinese leaders. Social critics and scholars have long pointed out the crisis in public morality.<sup>34</sup> This is one reason for the Chinese state’s new interest in Confucianism. Yet, last year’s “overnight sensation”—a book on Confucian ethics that sold like hotcakes—became a joke when it was revealed that the government had heavily subsidized the purchases. The joke was enriched with the serendipitous publication of a disdainful biography of Confucius titled *Homeless Dog*, highlighting the Sage’s fruitless efforts to find a

political patron. In short, patriarchal Confucianism, monastic Buddhism, and state socialism are inadequate to meet the spiritual needs of the modern individual and the single-child nuclear family in China today.

Can Chinese Christianity help fill that gap? Surveys of the new middle class find greater interest in self-enrichment activities like travel, training, and sports, rather than in religious and charitable pursuits.<sup>35</sup> But one Beijing scholar argues that Protestantism has potential: it provides a moral framework for individuals, gives them a “higher” purpose than just making money, provides greater stability within family life, and stems the tide of negative social values—all the while helping Chinese identify with global modernity.<sup>36</sup>

The more practical Weberian bourgeois virtues also come with the Protestant package. Courses and training in biblically based business ethics and management are popular in a Chinese culture featuring rampant corruption. Faithfulness, truthfulness, and abstention from addictive habits build trust in the workaday world and have won Christians a reputation as model workers. Nevertheless, at times, the exercise of these virtues comes at a price. A number of Christian acquaintances have cited instances in which, upon refusing to carry out an illegal or immoral task demanded by their employers, they or their friends have lost their jobs—not an uncommon experience in today's China.

But perhaps the core Christian value that appeals most to both rural “second class” citizens and modern urbanites flows from the essential Protestant belief in the individual dignity and equality of man in the eyes of God. From these principles arise opposition to special privilege and a desire to see social justice that transcends the traditional bonds of family and kinship. As one educated, middle-class Chinese acquaintance stressed, “Whatever else Christians preach, they should continue preaching equality.” This has provided a natural opening for local churches and Christians in local civic associations to help migrants gain access to education and medical care and to bring services to the poor in villages. Finally, the strong transnational nature of Christianity,

with its commitment to a universal community built on the notion of the fundamental equality of mankind under God, makes it a natural incubator of cosmopolitanism in China. Among Chinese Christians, there is a sense of citizenship in the world, which is reflected in the support they seek from human rights advocates that live outside of China.

Christian communities in China are undoubtedly becoming stronger. But they are still too weak to generate a dramatic change in Chinese civic life, focused as they still are on survival and the care of their members. They have not yet articulated a vision, nor do they have the freedom necessary for taking on this larger role. That said, as one Chinese political analyst has suggested, “all the Christians have to do is grow in number, status, and financial resources. They have all the human resources needed in terms of social capital and spiritual capital.” Nor are Chinese Christians lacking in hope for the future, as the *Washington Post's* former Beijing correspondent John Pomfret noted while researching a series of articles on the house church networks. When compared with the secular intellectuals he knew, for example, house church leaders were far more optimistic about the possibility—or even inevitability—of Chinese political reforms.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

In *The Great Disruption*, Francis Fukuyama posits that history is linear and progressive in terms of political and economic/technological progress but cyclical in social and moral spheres. Typically, the rate of technological change exceeds the rate of social adjustment. When culture fails to keep up with technological change—when the supply of social capital fails to match demand—societies run into trouble.<sup>38</sup> Fukuyama also argues that the loss of social capital can be regained through “renorming” or “remoralization” of society through discussion and argument, or even culture wars. The widespread adoption of key virtues leading to trust plays a central role in reconstituting social order. He argues, for example, that Protestant revivals and social reforms linked to them were responsible for the



decline of the crime rate in Britain beginning in the 1840s and in urban America in the 1870s.

Fukuyama's concept of cyclical change in culture fits well with Chinese history. Periods of major disequilibrium in the past have led to a moral crisis and a search for new political philosophies and institutions to bring about a new cohesive order. Examples include the fall of the Ming dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century, the decay of the Qing dynasty during 1870–1911, and the collapse of Republicanism by the late 1920s—and today, the long twilight of Communism since the Cultural Revolution.

With the collapse of the socialist model and the rise of an authoritarian capitalist model, there has been a distinct decline in public morality within China. Today, there is rampant materialism, sexual license, corruption, and, as a result, widespread cynicism. Yet, as Perry Link has indicated, people in China retain a strong moral impulse and are seeking a moral compass for both private and public life. They are “groping to reestablish some kind of value system that might do for China today what Confucianism used to do”<sup>39</sup>—and, I would add, what socialism did for a time.

Could Christianity play a leading moral role in China's postindustrial, postcommunist society, as it once did in its early industrial modernizing society? Sociologist Richard Madsen is pessimistic. His studies of isolated Roman Catholic villages suggest they are still steeped in the martyr mentality of the underground church. Rural traditions have produced a typical Chinese attraction to millenarian, miracle-producing faiths. From this comes the hope among some Chinese Christian dissidents that their activism will weaken the socialist state in China, as it once did in Eastern Europe. He also sees “the sinification of Christianity” as leading to a fragmented church, in which the Christian faith is appropriated by many different groups for many different purposes. Given the wide variety of Chinese Christian doctrinal practices and organizational styles, in Madsen's view, Chinese society in general—and turbulent Christian communities in particular—are returning to the early-twentieth-century fragmentation Maoists tried to overcome.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, historian Daniel Bays is more optimistic. His research on early twentieth-century Protestantism leads him to conclude that the rise of Christianity in China is a force most compatible with the nature and needs of modern society. He sees Chinese Christian churches meeting basic human needs with social services, urban middle-class Protestants taking an increased interest in local civic life, and Chinese Christian professionals working to establish stable family lives. He also notes that studies around the world of Pentecostals steeped in allegedly pre-modern faith-healing and other charismatic practices demonstrate that they have actually helped smooth the way for a successful adaptation to the strains of economic modernization.<sup>41</sup>

At this point, it is simply too early to tell whether Protestant Christianity will once again play a significant role in the reordering of China's civic life. So far, the state in China has avoided the constitutional and legal changes required to enable the nonprofit sector to fully contribute to the “remoralization” of society. Its contributions are still distorted by the legal structures that keep civic organizations marginalized. Still, Protestant culture in particular is “coming out” in society. And there is no question that it meets a need that China's government sees but also worries about. In sum, there is considerable potential when it comes to the impact of China's Christians on the country's social and civic order, but for all the growth in numbers and activities that has occurred since the end of the Maoist era, it remains to be seen how much of that potential will be realized in the years and decades ahead.

## Notes

1. The baseline for official numbers of religious adherents in China is a government census in the mid-1990s: 100 million Buddhists (including 7 million Tibetan Buddhists), 18 million Muslims (8.6 million Uighur, 7.2 million Hui), 11 million Christians (4 million Catholics, 7 million Protestants), and 50,000 Taoists.

2. In October 1998, the Compass Direct news service quoted an official charged with monitoring religious activity who acknowledged in an anonymous interview that Protestants likely numbered more than 50 million.

3. Jonathan Watts, "Chinese Survey Finds Religion Booming," *Guardian*, February 7, 2007.

4. For official PRC figures of 5 million Catholics and 15 million Protestants versus Vatican figures of 10 million Catholics and State Department figures of 30–90 million Protestants, see "Crossing the Communists," *The Economist*, April 21, 2005. Tony Lambert pointed out that even public figures from provincial Protestant associations in 2005 added up to over 20 million, compared with the 17 million that central association leaders were using. (Tony Lambert, "How Many Christians in China?" *China Insight*, August/September 2005.) Daniel H. Bays speaks of 40–50 million Protestants and 12–15 million Catholics. (Daniel H. Bays, "State and Religion in Historical Context in China—Christianity" [conference remarks, Washington, DC, January 19, 2005].) The upper range would be 5 percent of 1.3 billion, with growth to 10 percent of 1.4 billion in 2020 adding up to 140 million. In *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), David Aikman posits that Christians will make up 20–30 percent of the population by 2030.

5. Throughout this essay, I share such anecdotal evidence but err on the side of caution by disguising names and places, given the repressive atmosphere in the civic sector.

6. The following discussion is based on Peter L. Berger, "Introduction: The Cultural Dynamics of Globalization," in *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, ed. Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 116.

7. See Kim-kwong Chan, "Accession to the World Trade Organization and State Adaptation," in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, ed. Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 61ff. While overseas, some Chinese have come to embrace Mormon, Hindu, Greek Orthodox, Bahá'í, and even Shinto faiths not authorized in China. The proliferation of sects is part and parcel of cultural globalization; countries worldwide are trying to understand and manage such "new religious movements." Over twenty

have been banned in China since 2000 as "evil cults" (*xiejiao*) to be eradicated, including the Falun Gong spiritual movement and the pseudo-Christian Eastern Lightning sect.

8. Fenggang Yang and Joseph B. Tamney, eds., *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies* (Boston: Brill, 2005). Political and cultural nationalists align with the government in using state power to favor Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. There are new types of congregational or evangelical Buddhism, distinctions among Muslim sects, and proliferating sects of "folk faiths."

9. See Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857–1927* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

10. This discussion is drawn from Carol Lee Hamrin and Stacey Bieler, eds., introduction to *Salt and Light: Lives of Faith That Shaped Modern China* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

11. Sun Minyi, "Developing an Understanding of Urban House Churches in Mainland China," informal translation from *Behold* magazine (U.S.) and the *Christian Times* (Hong Kong), May 2007.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Kim-kwong Chan, "Missiological Implications of Chinese Christianity in a Globalized Context," *Quest* 4, no. 2 (November 2005): 55–74.

14. For creative research on the political economy of religion in China, see Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black and Gray Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 93–122.

15. Guanghu He, "From the Scriptures to Life: A Hope for Education for Shared Values in Today's China," *China Study Journal* 19, nos. 2–3 (August–December, 2004).

16. Tang Yuankai, "Mindful of the Past," *Beijing Review*, October 21, 2004. On October 20, 2004, Reuters cited a *Shanghai Daily* report on the Shanghai Education Commission's academic research office list of recommended summer reading for middle school students, including the Bible.

17. Carol Lee Hamrin, "To Serve the People: NGOs and the Development of Civil Society in China" (testimony, Roundtable of the Congressional-Executive Commission on NGOs in China, Washington, DC, March 24, 2003), available at [www.cecc.gov/pages/roundtables/032403/index.php](http://www.cecc.gov/pages/roundtables/032403/index.php) (accessed May 5, 2008).

18. Marvin Olasky, "Wildfire," *World*, June 24, 2006,

available at [www.worldmag.com/articles/11971](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/11971) (accessed May 5, 2008).

19. Through 2005, the First People's Intermediate Court of Beijing was forced to postpone trials and then to provide a second trial, with family present, for house church pastor Cai Zhuohua. Cai was accused of illegal business activities despite his claim that the Bibles and other religious material he published were distributed free of charge rather than for commercial gain. On the eve of President Bush's November 2005 visit to China, Cai and two others received relatively light sentences and strong pressure not to appeal further. See the trial results as reported by Compass Direct, November 16, 2005, and more details on the case in *Chinese Law & Religion Monitor* 2, no. 1 (January–June 2006). Elsewhere in Henan, according to a press release from China Aid Association dated September 25, 2006, a district court in August revoked a "Reeducation through Labor" decision against a house church Christian who had pursued his right to request an administrative review and, when that failed, lodged a lawsuit with the court.

20. Martin Luther King Jr.'s activities are part of the public school curriculum, and his "I Have a Dream" speech inspired the 2008 Olympics slogan "One World, One Dream." (Tony Carnes, "China's New Legal Eagles," *Christianity Today*, September 2006.)

21. China Aid Association, news releases, November 25, 2005, and March 1, 2006. Established in 2004, the alliance reportedly soon had 300,000 members in twenty-one provinces.

22. Gao defended cases involving a Shaanxi oil spill, Shaanxi coal miners, Guangdong farmers losing their land, evicted courtyard homeowners in Beijing, house church members brutalized by police in Xinjiang, members of Falun Gong, and a group of villagers who sought to recall their elected village chief for corruption. After Gao released an open letter to Hu Jintao in October 2005 reporting on atrocities of mental, physical, and sexual torture of Falun Gong and other alleged cult members, the confrontation escalated. Gao's colleague, Guo Feixiong, was detained in Guangzhou for "illegal business activities," and a Chinese filmmaker and Internet activist from the United States was detained just before a planned meeting with Gao. After several run-ins with police thugs, Gao released a statement of withdrawal from the Chinese Communist Party and

joined others in a fast to protest persecution of rights activists. In August 2006, police in his hometown of Shandong detained and held Gao and his family incommunicado. Dissidents overseas and Tiananmen activists in China, led by writer Liu Xiaobo, registered their protest over his treatment, prompting the government to release him (no doubt with his movement restricted).

23. An example would be the Dongyue Miao, a vast Taoist complex dating to the rule of Kublai Khan, which was occupied by the Beijing Public Security Bureau until 2000 but even then not returned to the Taoist association. Foreign holders of deeds further complicate this issue. The Roman Catholic Church, with its vast landholdings before 1949, had an estimated RMB 130 billion worth of property under dispute in 2005. The *South China Morning Post* reported on February 19, 2002, that a number of historic religious sites are being restored in Beijing but are not being returned to religious bodies. An example is the Bada Chui Buddhist complex (with eight temples) in the Western Hills.

24. In Xi'an, the congregations of both the oldest Protestant church and the main Catholic cathedral in prime downtown locations were evicted and forced to accept less desirable locations for rebuilding, while their historic buildings were torn down. Hundreds of normally placid citizens in these registered venues demonstrated in protest, with little support from their respective association leaders. International attention followed the fierce beatings by hired thugs of sixteen Catholic nuns, five of whom sustained permanent injuries, prompting protests from international Catholic leaders and the European and Italian parliaments. (Philip P. Pan, "Five Chinese Nuns Hospitalized after Land Dispute," *Washington Post*, December 2, 2005.)

25. Simon Elegant, "The War for China's Soul," *Time*, August 28, 2006. See also China Aid Association, news releases, August 2, 2006, and August 9, 2006. The independent Dangsha Church was founded by Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission in 1867 but was labeled "counterrevolutionary" in 1956, after the government occupied its property. In the July 2006 incident, when hundreds were injured and over fifty church leaders were detained by police without any information provided to families, the congregation requested a list and details of arrests, medical treatment and release of detainees, a permit for a proper place to worship, and a public apology

and reimbursement for losses. Five of those detained were issued formal notification of criminal detention for instigating violence and obstruction of the law (although twenty remained in detention). On August 2, the Chinese House Church Alliance released a statement through China Aid Association that called for international intervention and detailed the history of this confrontation. On December 23, 2006, Xinhua reported that eight of the individuals involved in the protest had received sentences.

26. Precursors to Christian leadership for dissent date back to at least 1988–89. Seminary students in Beijing and Nanjing marched in the demonstrations carrying a cross, and a popular pastor in the Haidian church in Beijing was later dismissed for harboring congregation members who had been involved (including at least one lawyer active today). Throughout the 1990s, a surprising number of prominent dissidents who fled the country converted to Christianity in Europe or the United States, including activists Yang Jianli and Peng Ming, Zhang Boli, Yuan Zhiming, Wang Xizhe, and even the famous writer Wang Ruowang before his death.

27. Martin Lee (from a prominent mainland family) heads the Democratic Party, and Shanghai-born Joseph Cardinal Zen's Hong Kong diocese has the largest number of Chinese Catholics in the world. Many Christians have participated in peaceful demonstrations over various issues. Zen was voted Hong Kong's Person of the Year 2002 by readers of the *Apple Daily*, who called him the moral conscience of Hong Kong and found him a symbol of "the struggle for truth, freedom and universal love." News of his appointment as cardinal in early 2006 monopolized the Hong Kong mass media for days. Notably, almost all of the younger bishops on the mainland had been his students when he taught there part time from 1989 to 1996. See Gianni Criveller, "Bishop Zen, Hong Kong's Person of the Year," *Tripod* 22, no. 128 (Spring 2003): 29–31; and Gianni Criveller, "A Cardinal in Hong Kong," *Tripod* 26, no. 141 (Summer 2006): 55–58.

28. Verna Yu, biographical sketch of Yu Jie, *South China Morning Post*, July 31, 2003.

29. Sarah Schafer and Jonathan Ansfield, "Strength from Their Faith," *Newsweek International*, July 24, 2006. The three, along with poet Bei Cun, journalist Jiao Guobiao, and law experts Fan Yafeng and Gao Zhisheng, are members of the independent Ark (*fangzhou*) Church in Beijing. The

meeting was arranged by Bob Fu, founder and president of Christian Aid in Midland, Texas, which has become a major channel for communicating information on house church religious rights cases. Fu is a former teacher in Beijing who, with his wife, was detained and beaten for leading Bible studies at the municipal party school.

30. See Tong Zhan, "The United Front Work System and the Nonparty Elite," in *Decision-Making in Deng's China: Perspectives from Insiders*, ed. Carol Lee Hamrin and Suisheng Zhao (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 66–75.

31. "Religious Affairs Regulations (Authorized Release)," Xinhua, November 30, 2004. See Peter Barry, "Regulations on Religious Affairs," *Tripod* 25, no. 136 (Spring 2005): 5–18.

32. See a Xinhua report quoted in *China Church Quarterly* (Summer 2006): 5.

33. "Hu Stresses Full Implementation of Free Religious Policy," Xinhua, December 19, 2007.

34. Shining Gao, "Faith and Values: Case Studies of Chinese Intellectual Christians," *China Study Journal* 18, no. 2 (August 2002): 21–22.

35. Xin Wang, "Divergent Identities, Convergent Interests: The Rising Middle-Income Stratum in China and Its Civic Awareness," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 54 (February 2008): 66–67.

36. Shining Gao, "Faith and Values: Case Studies of Chinese Intellectual Christians," 28.

37. Personal communication with the author, 2004.

38. Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

39. Perry Link, "Corruption and Indignation: Windows into Popular Chinese Views of Right and Wrong" (Tocqueville on China, AEI, February 2008), available at [www.aei.org/publication27763/](http://www.aei.org/publication27763/).

40. Richard Madsen, "Chinese Christianity: Indigenization and Conflict," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, 2nd ed. (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 271–88.

41. Daniel H. Bays, "Chinese Protestant Christianity Today," in *Religion in China Today*, ed. Daniel L. Overmyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 196–97. See also David H. Lumsdaine, ed. *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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### **About the Tocqueville on China Project**

This paper was commissioned by the American Enterprise Institute in conjunction with its Tocqueville on China project. Directed by AEI's Gary J. Schmitt and Dan Blumenthal, the project examines topics and issues designed to provide greater insight and an enhanced understanding of contemporary Chinese civic culture. For more, see [www.aei.org/tocqueville/](http://www.aei.org/tocqueville/).