

Workshop Report: Contemporary Chinese Protestantism and Ongoing Developments in Church-State Relations

by

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a workshop convened at the Long Term Strategy Group on March 9, 2007, scholars from the Boston area and elsewhere gathered to discuss the study, “Contemporary Chinese Protestantism and Ongoing Developments in Church-State Relations,” and recommend future research directions.

The study argues that the Chinese party-state has failed to control the reemergence of religion on the mainland and that Protestantism has gained a high degree of tolerance and de facto religious freedom by operating outside of the state’s control, often with the complacency of local officials.

A question tentatively raised but not resolved in the study is whether and to what extent various Chinese Protestant groups coordinate with each other and participate in collective action to resist state interference, or to what extent they could do so in the future.

The major issues discussed include:

- the difficulty of finding unbiased, non-missionary sources on recent developments in Chinese Christianity;
- why Christianity – especially rural Protestantism – continues to grow at such a tremendous rate, outstripping traditional religions such as Buddhism;
- whether central policy intentionally seeks to create a grey area in which some religious practices are not clearly legal or illegal;
- recent developments in religious law and patterns of enforcement;
- the ability of Protestant groups to network with each other and their potential to create instability through collective action;
- possible future directions for Chinese Protestantism and church-state relations in general;
- and the future influence of Chinese scholarship in the global academic community, both within the field of religious studies and generally.

Overall, the workshop participants seemed to think that the Chinese government’s approach to religion may be more effective than the study implied and that the de facto freedoms enjoyed by some religious practitioners may be intentional on the part of the state. The attendees were also skeptical of the potential for Christian groups to mount a coordinated challenge to the current regime.

II. WORKSHOP REPORT

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The study also offers the following general outline of contemporary Protestant groups and their characteristics:

1. **Registered Churches** (around 15 million members): Gaining legal recognition by registering with the government, the 'official church,' the Three Self Patriotic Movement, has been divided into three main subgroups by the current China team leader of the Eurasia Group,

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- **'Captive Church'** (several million): Operating in large cities and strictly controlled minority areas, the captive church is undermined by interference in church operations and a theology that supports the state.
 - **'Contained Church'** (several million): Operating in small and mid-sized cities, the contained church is free to manage its internal affairs but is prevented from forming alliances with other social groups.
 - **'Folk Church'** (approximately 10 million): Operating in rural areas, the folk church is free of all state control and is often nearly indistinguishable from house churches or sectarian congregations.
2. **House Churches** (around 20 million members): Incredibly diverse and of dubious legality, house churches are generally able to spurn registration with impunity, operating freely and often allying with local interests.
 3. **Sectarian Churches** (several million members): Believing they alone possess the truth, Protestant sects primarily evangelize fellow Christians and are often associated with extremism, violence, and subversion of other churches.

What follows is a general summary of the discussion which took place at the workshop, focusing on the major concerns and issues that were raised.

DIFFICULTY OF FINDING APPROPRIATE SOURCES

Several scholars discussed the difficulties involved in relying on missionary sources for information on Chinese Protestant activities, since these may provide a distorted picture of the actual situation on the ground or emphasize the aspects of Chinese Protestantism in which missionaries or their foreign supporters are most interested. The participants then discussed if there were viable alternative sources of information on many of these churches. No easy answers appeared to be forthcoming, demonstrating that finding solid information on Chinese Christianity is still highly problematic. One scholar lamented the lack of sociologies of religious identity and conversion or of the Religious Affairs Bureau officials involved in monitoring these groups. Overall, these comments indicated the need to contact, support, or inspire the creation of non-missionary sources with on-the-ground information about what is happening in different types of Chinese Protestant communities.

WHY CHRISTIANITY?

Like many scholars in the field, the workshop participants wondered about the extremely rapid growth of Protestantism in the reform era, even compared with native institutional religions like Buddhism, which traditionally performed many of the same functions that Protestantism seems to be doing now.

One participant remarked that, in Taiwan, it is Buddhism that has been on the rise, partially due to its involvement in philanthropy and humanitarian efforts among people who are not core believers, but also due to the government's preferential policies towards Buddhist organizations. That scholar suggested that if the mainland government is serious about restricting the rapid growth of Christianity, they should free up Buddhism – heavily restricted at present – to be an active competitor in the 'religious market.' In the future, conducting a comparative study of the growth of religion in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the wider Chinese diaspora would be useful in better understanding how local environment and government policy help determine which types of religions seem to be flourishing in different places.

Another scholar argued that religion can perform a whole host of duties – a boundary that separates and distinguishes people, a source of authority and legitimacy, a form of personal devotion, a spiritual stand-in for medicine or health insurance, a way to be more 'Western' and 'modern,' a way to be more 'Chinese' – and that several different kinds of growth are likely occurring, each of which possesses a different significance based on the impetus behind it. Distinguishing among the different motivations for the popularity of Chinese Protestantism seems difficult, though it might be possible to derive a list of potential motivators from the sources available and attempt to discuss their relative popularity.

One participant remarked on the tendency for mass conversions to happen where there are no clergy or (in the past) missionaries, in places where the church does not have strong roots. The largest growth in Christianity seem to happen in areas where Christianity functions as a type of Chinese popular religion, fully owned and disseminated by the common people without being closely managed or orchestrated by those with extensive training or experience. Another scholar also suggested that outside money had become necessary to many churches' operations but was

viewed as undermining their legitimacy. Churches that were viewed as being completely domestically supported were more respected.

This was true historically as well, with international missionaries having much less success winning converts to their alien religion than the native preachers that followed them, but it seems in the modern era that this is likely to apply to regional and local divisions as well. It is quite likely that visiting ministers from other provinces would be less successful at church building than lay religious leaders from local communities. If true, this means that principles of self-determination are not merely nationalistic in nature, but reflect a deeper concern about ownership and localism. Missionary support or receiving funding from international organizations is merely the most blatant way a group can appear to lose touch with its local support base.

In regard to local communities, one participant suggested that there seemed to be very little intermarriage or even interaction between Christians and non-Christians who live in the same village and that it was important to consider both extra-communal (with other Christians in other communities) and intra-communal (with non-Christians in the same community) ties. If Protestants have poor intra-communal ties, that means converting the rest of their village may be problematic and groups may be forced to seek ties with Christian communities in other villages or keep mainly to themselves. But, with so little research available, it's hard to speculate much on the interactions between these two types of relations.

EFFICACY OF CENTRAL POLICY

Perhaps the most significant and challenging objection to the overall conclusions of the study was the suggestion that the existence of a 'grey area' in Chinese religion – allowing groups to practice in ways that are not clearly legal or illegal, largely avoiding state repression – represents an intentional move on the part of the authoritarian Chinese state, not a lack of control. By allowing such grey spaces to exist, the state in effect gets popular feedback on its policies. People operate outside of the state's direct interference and the state is able to see what the needs and desires of the people actually are, allowing the state to then work to react to or create the illusion of having met those needs.

It is disappointing that this significant point was not discussed in more detail. It remains unclear what would be required to call these grey areas 'strategic' (intentionally permitted by the state in an attempt to gain some benefit) as opposed to 'pragmatic' (permitted by the state because repressing them would be too costly based on the limited threat they pose). It is also unclear, if we accept the grey areas as a strategic choice, how successful such a strategy has been, because it is unclear what the larger goals of the strategy might be. This study argues that national and local officials pragmatically repress various religious groups based on the perceived cost of repression and the perceived threat level posed by the group. Building an alternative model – based on the perceived benefits of allowing grey areas to exist and other unconsidered factors – might be possible, but it would require substantial rethinking of many of the claims put forward in this study. Personally, I would be hesitant to undertake such a study without firmer evidence that the grey areas of religion are intentional on the part of the state.

One scholar also pointed out that, because no one knows when and how the grey turns ‘black’ (illegal), there is a great amount of fear and self-censorship that goes on, allowing the party-state to exert a degree of control even when it is not actively restricting or cracking down on people. So the Chinese state, in practice, broadcasts a shadow of control even over unclear, grey areas. This is certainly a substantial point worthy of further exploration, since it is certainly true that the state has been very successful in manipulating and dominating the discourse about religious belief and practice in China. This domination even extends to discussions among religious groups that have very little to fear in the way of direct intervention and those who oppose the state’s religious policy. A thorough documentation of this would be very beneficial to the field of Chinese religious studies.

LAWS AND ENFORCEMENT

One participant mentioned the difficulties surrounding attempts to register 7th Day Adventists congregations in Shanxi. Other Christians, including many people in the Three Self Patriotic Movement, do not want them to be legally recognized, but Adventists churches are insisting that they be allowed to join. In this particular case, government officials are finding themselves having to make decisions based on doctrinal or theological grounds, such as ‘if you baptize in running water, you’re heterodox.’ Clearly, these are not the kinds of enforcement decisions most officials are prepared to make.

Money was also a popular topic. A participant reported that, based on personal experiences interviewing and researching in Xinjiang, Religious Affair Bureau and Public Security Bureau officials report on religious activities in their area in a way that validates or improves their funding and personal position. Another scholar suggested that scholars who are truly interested in the relationship between religious groups and the state should consider trying to follow the money involved. Many religious sites and institutions are currently making money hand over fist and clearly the state and local interests are both interested in leveraging some of these funds for their own purposes.

Several scholars remarked on potential deviations in religious law across various geographic regions or after the most recent change in political leadership. One participant wondered about the regionalization of national laws, but another said that, in their understanding, they were all based on a template and didn’t really deviate much. Yet another participant suggested that, in any case, the content of the laws doesn’t matter much when it comes to implementation, which most people seemed to grant. Later on, one participant also objected to the new 2005 *Regulations on Religious Affairs* being characterized as more progressive than earlier implementations of religious policy, suggesting that it actually represented more of the same or even a more concerted effort to exert control. Change and deviation, it seems, is not evident when looking at religious law.

NETWORKING AND POTENTIAL INSTABILITY

Another major point of discussion was the study’s suggestion that Protestant groups possess the ability to network on a trans-regional level and, if motivated, could potentially use this ability for

collective resistance – whether passive or active – on a scale that would pose significant difficulties for the state.

A few participants indicated that a general solidarity among Christians seemed unlikely to materialize, especially since the Chinese state is very good at isolating religious groups that have earned its direct attention – such as Falun Gong – and making it very difficult for any other groups to ally with them or rally to their aid. The South China Church in particular was mentioned as not receiving much support from other Protestants during the 2000-2001 crackdown and subsequent imprisonment of Gong Shengliang. House churches complained to their foreign Christian allies who then condemned the Chinese government, but Chinese churches did not stand up for the SCC themselves. Generally, the workshop participants found it difficult to imagine a set of conditions under which a wide variety of Protestant groups would unite for collective action towards a common cause.

Other participants pointed out that collective action is not always contentious, that groups can organize and even conduct protests and rallies without presenting a significant challenge to the state. The sophistication of China's public security forces enables the management of a large number of 'collective public security incidents' (mass protests) each year, often without having to address or even acknowledge the protestor's concerns. While prominent officials have, in recent years, tried to indicate their concern about several of the major causes of rural unrest (illegal land seizures, illegal taxes and fees, gross instances of industrial pollution), religious issues were not among the recognized factors, probably because the number of religiously motivated protests is dwarfed by those related to economic and health issues.

As one scholar argued, protesting seems to be the last thing on the minds of Chinese Christians. Individual, unrelated instances of religiously motivated collective action may still occur when churches or entire Protestant sects are denied official recognition or the right to operate in a particular location or building. However, generally speaking, Chinese Protestants do not look to collective action as a way of improving their status and negotiating power with the government. If anything, mass protests make it more likely that a group will be banned as a cult, investigated by the Public Security Bureau, and become subject to state-sanctioned or privately organized repression. Participants seemed to agree that if Protestants are presenting or will at some point present a real challenge to state authority, it most likely will not be through collective public security incidents, but through less dramatic and more complicated methods of social change.

FUTURE OF PROTESTANTISM

Near the end of the workshop, the entire group directly addressed the future of Protestantism in China. Several scholars indicated that the sudden rise of a religious group like the Taiping or Falun Gong was difficult to foresee in advance, that if similar groups were on the move right now, it's not clear that anyone would be paying careful attention to them. However, the likelihood of such a momentous eruption of religious fever seemed relatively slim, as far as the participants could tell. One scholar suggested that if a large-scale religious conflict was unlikely and difficult to predict, it was important to consider more moderate possibilities.

Once such possibility the workshop discussed was the potential for Protestantism to be a cultural and social force for reform, pressuring the government through the creation of philanthropic or relief organizations which the state would be hesitant to suppress and working in other ways to speed along the emergence of civil society. However, one participant thought that size might be a problem in Protestantism having any wider effect on China, with Christians representing merely 4-5% of the population. Another scholar suggested that Christian growth was likely to top out around 7%, creating a sizable minority, but perhaps not enough to revolutionize society on its own. Yet another participant suggested that it's critical to pay attention to religion's transnational links, including connections to human rights and pro-democracy organizations, complete with lawyers. The importation of these products of civil society into China from the outside is sure to be a hazardous and difficult process, similar to the formation of NGOs, but progress could conceivably be made.

HISTORICAL CONCERNS

A few minor concerns were raised early on about the viability of the broad divisions outlined above in explaining the general picture of contemporary Chinese Protestantism. While no one seemed to object strongly to using these divisions to talk about the current state of Christianity in China, a few participants were careful to point out that the meta-categories of Protestantism presented in the study – official, independent, and sectarian – should not be carelessly applied to earlier historical eras. The current categories emerged out of and in response to the popular and state-supported anti-superstition and anti-religion movements of the late Qing and Nationalist eras (circa 1899-1937). Different models and categories would be needed if we wanted to better understand Protestantism before and during that period.

One workshop participant doubted the implied persisting influence of Taiping Christianity on sectarian Protestantism, since few Chinese Christians today would draw connections between this earlier form of Chinese Protestant sectarianism and contemporary groups and their practices. This indicates a need to be clearer about the importance of the Taiping's place in the history of Protestant sectarianism. The popularity and military success of Taiping believers and their allies indicate that Christian sectarianism is not a recent development in China, but one with established historical precedents, even if those historical groups do not exist in modern times or directly influence contemporary Christian sectarians.

As a minor point, one scholar was pleased that the study chose to address Protestant sectarianism, as opposed to simply following the oft-repeated dualism of Three Self churches vs. house churches, but he was amused that Matteo Ricci, the Italian Jesuit missionary to the Ming court, seemed to be categorized alongside Protestant sectarians simply because he associated the Judeo-Christian God with the primordial Yellow River Valley god, Shangdi. Ricci's place in the larger scheme of things could certainly stand to be clarified.

FUTURE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE SCHOLARSHIP

A final topic discussed by the group was one that affects not just the study of Chinese religion, but the global community of scholarship in general: the rise of Chinese intellectuals and the Chinese traditions of scholarship in various disciplines that have, up until this point, been

dominated by other forms of discourse and study. Unfortunately, as time was winding down, the scholars lacked the opportunity to speak much on this issue, but the idea was broached that many Western categories for thinking about Chinese society and culture do not fit particularly well and that Chinese scholarship has a claim to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of some of these aspects, one which could assist Western scholars and those from other parts of the world. However, some aspects of Chinese scholarship are also highly problematic, as many Chinese academics will freely admit. Strongly driven by competing ideologies, lax in attributing sources, and general far more arbitrary and less ‘scientific’ (*kexue*, implying ‘systematic’ or ‘methodical’) than scholarship in the West, the Chinese tradition of scholarship will necessarily be involved in a degree of give-and-take – as various scholarly traditions merge in a global environment. None of the participants were certain what the impact of China’s intellectual rise would be, but all were strongly interested in watching it unfold.


III. WORKSHOP ATTENDANCE LIST

Date of Workshop: 9 March 2007

Convener: (b)(6) (Long Term Strategy Group)

Participants:

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IV. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF MONOGRAPH, “CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PROTESTANTISM AND ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS IN CHURCH- STATE RELATIONS,” DISTRIBUTED IN ADVANCE

The Chinese Communist Party recognizes that it has failed to control the public reemergence of religion on the mainland. The traditional Party line claimed that religion (*zongjiao*) and superstitions (*mixin*) – under the guidance of the state – would eventually disappear as society became increasingly secular. However, in 2000 Jiang Zemin suggested religion would continue in the long-term, potentially outlasting the state, a remarkable shift away from touting the triumph of atheism.

The party-state perceives Protestantism – unlike Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religion – to be a foreign faith and a tool of Western cultural and political dominance. Additionally, state resistance to Protestant fervor, expansion, and autonomy demonstrates the Party’s commitment to being the sole ideological and social authority in China. Perceived as a threat but also impervious to most attempts at regulation, Protestantism has been the focus of recent policy discussions in a way that other religions have not.

The majority of Chinese Protestants operate without state oversight. Government leaders have been forced to reevaluate state policies toward Christianity because the threat of repression has lost its menace. Most Protestant organizations are willing and able to endure repression or other actions taken against them. Outside of major cities, sparse resources limit the options available to government officials. Consequently, Protestant activities are increasingly tolerated, even when such activities are not legally recognized.

This paper focuses on the main varieties of Chinese Protestantism – as defined by Chinese Christians – and their relative success at winning accommodation from local and national governments. Only a small proportion of registered churches preach a theology that supports the state. Most Chinese Protestants avoid public action but repeatedly use their faith to successfully organize passive resistance to state interference.

The general consensus – among Western scholars and Chinese church leaders – is that there are two major future directions for national religious policy. Officials can either tolerate independent religious groups in the hope of incorporating them into society or suppress them, creating increased dissatisfaction and resistance.

The Party shows every sign of continuing its mixed approach, tolerating most house churches while targeting groups it considers dangerous. Sectarian churches and some house church networks will continue to be repressed. Under this policy:

- Repressed house churches will continue to seek help from fellow Christians at home and abroad.
- Some sects will continue to grow even more radical; others will forswear radicalism and claim to be house churches.
- Repression campaigns will continue to be only partially or temporarily successful.

As church-state relations develop over the next few decades:

- Recognized churches will attempt to mitigate the persecution of house churches and repentant sectarians.
- Open communication between churches will decrease their vulnerability to sectarian evangelism and infiltration.
- The evangelical, fundamentalist majority will gain a public voice, increasing church-state tension.
- Foreign denominations will woo Chinese churches, threatening their independence and inter-cooperation.

In summary, Protestantism is poised to win this stage of its struggle with the state, gaining tolerance and a degree of religious freedom that it has never previously enjoyed in China. However, the Party will not make this process easy or be pleased with the outcome, complicating the next stage of this evolving relationship.

Protestantism's success in gaining both tolerance and actual concessions from local and national authorities provides a model that other non-governmental groups can learn from. By being persistent but also apolitical, Protestants have projected a non-threatening image that enables them to build grassroots support, even among non-Christians.