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Christian Responses in China's New Era

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Guest Editor

華源協作
CHINASOURCE

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Christian Responses in China's New Era

ChinaSource Quarterly **Spring 2023, Vol. 25, No. 1**

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New Directions in the New Era

By Peter Bryant, Guest Editor

How do you sense and describe an inflection point? When riding in a sports car through an S-curve you can feel the shift in acceleration. However, this kind of shift is harder to sense in the unfolding history of a country or culture. Fortunately, China's leaders have named and defined the start of the New Era (2012) as an inflection point for China's development. Building on the articles in the winter 2022 *ChinaSource Quarterly*, in this issue we continue reflecting on these shifts and their implications for Chinese Christians.

Two of our articles and the book review are written by Chinese believers. John Zhang helps us realize that the changes we have seen and experienced are part of broader societal and cultural shifts. These are largely attributed to the growth of nationalism with Chinese characteristics. Jerry An writes about new media and gives examples of the ongoing creativity and drive for Chinese Christians to be heard in their society using new media. The medium and format of the messages may be changing but the content and truth remains unchanged.

The book review, by seminarian Jacob Chengwei Feng, covers a new compilation of readings in Chinese theology. With the New Era becoming more of an ideological struggle, the importance of theological reflection has never been more important. This review will help readers who want to learn more about Chinese theologians.

I am thankful to have perspectives from two writers coming from an ethnic Korean background. Despite the commitment and activity of Korean Christians in China ministry, there is a dearth of information available in English. Sarah Lee delves into the results of interviewing over one hundred pastors across China. These pastors are navigating the demands of government regulations and their call to shepherd their flock. Their experiences highlight the government's attitude and policy towards the church. Shuya Kim in the lead article takes a broader and more historical look at both the Chinese church and global mission. We are reminded that God both uproots and plants, to accomplish the work of his kingdom and the building of his church.

Just before the end of zero-COVID restrictions, I interviewed a family about their experiences in the New Era. They provide insights into how changes have impacted their lives as they seek to follow Christ. At the end, they call us to join them in praying for China—for Christian leaders, for revival, and for impact in the marketplace and society.

I appreciate those who have been willing to speak out and share their reflections on the shifts of the New Era. There were others we had hoped to hear from who felt that the timing was too sensitive to say anything. One writer came down with COVID-19, spent time in the hospital and had to drop out for this issue while recovering. Others were too busy to write at this time. I hope we can hear from these individuals in the future. There are still many important and encouraging stories of God's work in China that need to be shared.

Since the winter *CSQ* was published, China has scrapped its COVID-19 controls and begun to open its borders again to international travel. While travel should gradually reach prior levels, the message we have heard

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New Era and New Roles

Changes and Issues for Chinese Ministries in a New Context

By Shuya Kim

Image credit: Mike Falkenstine, *One Catalyst*

In 2016, during a large missions camp in a coastal city, the "Religious Affairs Regulations Draft Revisions"[1] had just been published; we all sensed a fierce test was coming for the house churches. At that time, the almost six hundred participants in the four-day missions conference deeply felt God's leading. Since then, the megachurches and large gatherings that had developed vigorously in the first decade of the twenty-first century have gradually disappeared. Within a few years, all turned into small groups. The gap between the first and second decades is so great that it made us feel like we were sitting on the banks of the rivers in Babylon reminiscing about Zion (Psalm 137:1). This article explores the changes that have occurred in Chinese society and the Chinese church during the New Era. From this, we can think about what God is doing through these changes. Finally, we explore the roles overseas workers can play in the churches in China.

Changes Seen in the Past Ten Years

First, the political dimension. The biggest change is the change of the tenure system. China's current leader is already in his third term, and it looks like he will continue on. The collective leadership model that was established during the times of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao has been replaced by an individual leadership model.

Second, the economic side. The phenomenon of "the state advances while the people retreat"[2] is obvious. The government makes every effort to support state-owned enterprises and strives to guide the economy back to a state-owned economy. At the same time, private enterprise, with its owners' growing influence, is greatly suppressed.

Third, the social aspect. State surveillance of society is becoming stricter. One aspect is a system that includes grid management and establishing information officers. A second aspect is through technology, including facial recognition. The state continues to strengthen the control or stability maintenance of the entire society. This directly impacts the activities of churches and preachers. Preachers are increasingly being watched and followed, and there is almost no room for unregistered activities.

Finally, diplomatic circumstances. With China now gaining power on the world scene, she is gradually abandoning the strategic ideology of "hiding the light" and shifting to the tough "wolf warrior diplomacy" of "doing something." The existence of Christianity in China is not just an internal social issue but part of international relationships. The geopolitics of East Asia affect Sino-American relations, and Sino-American relations directly affect the situation of the church.

Development of the Church in China

Can we see how God has been at work in history? As we know, the number of churches and Christians grew rapidly after the Cultural Revolution. Revival began first with rural churches. By the first decade in the twenty-

first century the urban church ushered in a "golden age." Externally, people were friendly to Christianity, and the authorities were relatively tolerant. Internally, the unprecedented "Christianity fever" at that time allowed many churches to move from homes to office buildings, adopting a centralized church development strategy. For instance, almost all floors of a building in a city in the north were occupied by churches, somewhat like a Christian center. One could see many young people and intellectuals in the church. Churches had more resources. Some churches uncritically imported denominational theology and megachurch development models from the United States and Korea. Churches were optimistic about the future and even showed a tendency towards triumphalism. Voices were heard saying that the church should be part of mainstream society.

However, during the second decade the social environment deteriorated drastically. The church's public space was greatly diminished. The general attitude quickly became nationalistic, and authorities began to control the church more strictly. Internally, the church faced several challenges including intensified theological antagonism as well as the erosion of the church by materialism and consumerism. In fact, many church leaders confess that secularism is a greater threat to the church today than government persecution.

The explosive church growth seen previously had come to an end. The evangelism of young people became more difficult. Due to both generational and political factors, Chinese churches are now facing new challenges to effectively reach youth with the gospel. Some pastors began to pause, reflect, and ask important questions about ecclesiology: What went wrong? Were we too optimistic? Were there too many distractions related to non-essentials[3] during the development of the church? What should be the church's priority? What are the essentials for a church? How should the church be different from the world? Is denominational theology from the US really suitable for China? What about the megachurch model from Korea? Should we take this opportunity to reflect on and renew ecclesiology for the church in China in order to build a contextualized, yet global, indigenous theology?

> In the midst of many trials… people are seeking the meaning of life again. Will God's people play the role of patient leaven?

We see from history that God's work always has two aspects: one is to uproot or tear down, and the other is to plant and build (Jeremiah 1:10).

God is doing new things through these recent changes that are testing the church. He is removing secondary things that came out of the churches' rapid development over the past thirty years, and, by refining, he is building a community that will be separate from the world and faithful to Christ even in the midst of trials. How we wish that such a community would become a more mature, prophetic, indigenous, and contextualized church in China.

When we think of the church situation in China today, we remember the early church. According to Alan Kreider's book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*,[4] the most prominent feature of life in the early church in the first three hundred years was patience. Whether individually or corporately, the most distinctive traits in life, living habits, or even in commerce, were patience and generosity. However, during the Roman Empire patience was regarded as weak and was most lacking in Roman society. According to the Church Fathers, the patience of the early church stemmed from the endless patience shown to them by God. Will the church in China become faithful disciples that live out their faith in this hostile world? In the midst of many

trials, in China and on the global mission field, people are seeking the meaning of life again. Will God's people play the role of patient leaven? Let us humbly watch God at work.

New Roles for Overseas Workers and Churches

In this new context, how should overseas churches and workers adapt their roles? Together, let us consider the following challenges and recommendations.

First, we need to look at God's mission from a long-term perspective so that we will not be shaken due to changes of context but instead stand firm. There is an interesting phenomenon from the history of missions to China: the pendulum swings from peripheral areas to the homeland. Due to the closed-door policy during the Qing dynasty, in the early days, missionaries such as Robert Morrison and others were not able to set foot on Chinese soil. They were forced to stay in peripheral areas from 1807–1842. When the door was forced open,[5] missionaries moved from surrounding areas and were able to work in China for around 100 years (1842–1949). Then, during and after the Cultural Revolution, they were pushed to peripheral areas again from 1950 to 1978. With reform and opening up, there has been a renewed shift from the periphery to the mainland. In recent years, due to the shift in national conditions, we have again seen a shift from the mainland to the periphery.

Yet, from this historical pendulum phenomenon, we find two constants. The first constant is from the missionary perspective. Despite times of moving forward and times of withdrawal, our sovereign God, who is the God of history, never leaves. He is always present with his people and has never left this land. The second constant, although we have witnessed the weakness of human beings and a moment of frustration, from a long-term perspective God's church has kept moving forward and kept growing. If we look back at the 200 years of history of how Christianity came to China, we know how the churches have experienced drought, plague, turbulence, revolution, war, opposition, and persecution. Yet, from a tiny seed she has grown to become a tree planted by the river, full of green leaves even in the year of drought (Jeremiah 17:7–8). Furthermore, the time has come that God is no longer just moving missionaries from the mainland to the periphery; God is sending Chinese missionaries from the mainland to the periphery. Is not this what Robert Morrison and Hudson Taylor had hoped to see two hundred years ago? Despite the many trials churches face today, we should never lose this historical perspective.

Most cross-cultural workers have expressed that compared to what they used to do four or five years ago, their ***doing*** now is much less, yet their ***being and sense of belonging*** with local brothers and sisters are much stronger.

Second is the importance of the ministry of presence. As it is more difficult and costly for overseas workers to stay in China, the ministry they are involved in is more precious and valuable. Their presence represents brothers and sisters from the global church, which is a great spiritual comfort and encouragement to local brothers and sisters. Most cross-cultural workers have expressed that compared to what they used to do four or five years ago, their ***doing*** now is much less, yet their ***being and sense of belonging*** with local brothers and sisters are much stronger. When there is a high cost to pay due to the external environment, the mutual trust and bonding become deeper. Those who consider themselves pilgrims or servants of the gospel may see

these ministries as minimal, yet their presence with suffering brothers and sisters indeed demonstrates the mode of mission—our weakness truly reveals God's power (see 2 Corinthians 12:9). Lesslie Newbigin referred to this idea as mission from a position of weakness,[6] and John Stott described it as power through weakness.[7] We trust all those who are able to stay on this soil would agree this is worthwhile.

Third, is the understanding of missiology based on holistic mission. To be able to practice a ministry of presence in China, one must be a professional or business person. But rather than using one's work just as a platform or means of being resident there, it is essential to establish a mission theology based on a holistic gospel and integral mission. In other words, your social status and your work are your ministry, and your life carries the gospel message. This writer knows a couple doing business in a minority area in the western provinces just like Priscilla and Aquila. Their business and mission are not divided but are nicely integrated as a whole.

While they practice a biblical value system in their business management, they also exercise cross-cultural discipleship with their local employees. Cross-cultural here refers to crossing the mission field culture (Han mainstream culture and minority culture), and the co-workers' own culture. It also refers to the "kingdom enterprise culture" and "secular business culture." Evangelism and missions mean crossing or breaking boundaries. When overseas churches and workers realize this breakthrough in the concept of missions, they will discover that the door to missions in China remains open.

Evangelism and missions mean crossing or breaking boundaries. When overseas churches and workers realize this...they will discover that the door to missions in China remains open.

Finally, the role of overseas workers and their mode of service need adjustment. Since many changes have occurred in the Chinese church over the past forty years, roles of overseas workers should adjust accordingly. Overseas workers must reduce their frontline work and large-scale training and instead strengthen journeying with local pastors one-on-one or in small group work. This will help speed up the pace of indigenization as well as reduce risk.

I cannot stress enough the importance of journeying with local pastors. Many of the local frontline workers, especially sisters, face many difficulties and needs in their lives including personality issues, family problems such as marriage and parenthood, or trauma arising from their family of origin. Some churches emphasize only work which results in burnout. These pastors really need one-on-one care and spiritual support, but they also need an understanding of what discipleship is and how to train small group leaders. Overseas workers need to switch roles from being teachers to being good listeners.

Many Chinese pastors are first generation Christians and belong to a spiritually fatherless generation. Under internal and external pressures, plus many uncertainties, they so much want to share their stories but are in need of people who will listen to them. Who will journey with this fatherless generation? Who will listen, ask questions, and journey with them so that they can discern God's will for themselves through God's word?

The twenty-first century is an era of global mission. The characteristic of global mission is that it is not a one-way encounter between giver and beneficiary but rather a two-way learning and interdependence in God's

mission. Meanwhile, the context of the global mission field is no longer from the haves or the powerful to those who have not or are powerless; instead, it is more like the early churches where the powerless went to a powerful country. China's context today calls for our learning and practicing global mission which is God's mission. How we long to see the Chinese churches that are currently in a "spiritual bitter winter" as the faithful minority standing firm for their faith in a hostile environment, just like those who did so during the Cultural Revolution. Despite the fact that they are not in the mainstream, yet they stand next to the cross to testify to our God and persevere so that once again they may experience true revival. What an honor that they are inviting us to journey together with them!

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[1] See Brent Fulton, "New Religion Regulations to Take Effect in February," *ChinaSource Blog,* September 13, 2017, accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/new-religion-regulations-to-take-effect-in-february/.
[2] The Chinese phrase 国进民退 expresses the idea that the state-owned part of the economy is expanding while the private sector retracts and shrinks.
[3] Because the church had more civil space and resources during this time, the focus of church leaders gradually moved to externally visible development such as large meeting places and numbers in attendance rather than discipleship and indigenous theology development.
[4] See Alan Krieder, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 336.
[5] During the late Qing dynasty, the "door" was finally opened, not as a voluntary opening, but by military force (the Opium Wars) and a series of unequal treaties. These treaties included an agreement giving foreign missionaries permission to propagate their faith. As a result, the hearts of Chinese people were tightly closed especially during 1842–1900 when, according to statistics, 800 anti-foreign explosions broke out.
[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 5, 62.
[7] John Stott, *Calling Christian Leaders: Rediscovering Radical Servant Ministry* (London: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 39.

Shuya Kim (pseudonym) left Korea in 1991 and has been working with an international missions organization. He is a former field director of Chinese ministries in that organization. Currently he is journeying with indigenous Chinese missions organizations and missionaries as a mentor and friend in the context of global missions.

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from various writers is that the New Era is moving forward and there is no going back. Despite the increasing challenges, our writers see opportunities and God's hand in building his church in China.

Over the last 30 years, Peter Bryant (pseudonym) has had the chance to visit, to live for extended periods of time, and to travel to almost all of China's provinces. As a Christian business person, he has met Chinese from all walks of life. He has a particular interest in marketplace ministries and business as mission and enjoys working with emerging Chinese leaders.

Changing the Rules of the Game

China's New Era and New Media

By Jerry An

Image credit: Sam Balye via UnSplash.

Jerry An has worked in media ministry since 2001 and now serves as the Chinese Team Leader at ReFrame Ministries, a Chinese-language ministry that has become a pioneer, think tank, and partner in new media ministry.

There is no doubt that China's New Era (2012–present) is also the era of new media. In December 2012, I convened a conference with more than thirty participants from seventeen Christian media organizations and publishers, with individuals and church representatives coming from both China and overseas. At that time, it was still possible to host the conference in Beijing.

I recently looked back over my notes from that meeting. This is what the last paragraph says: "The next ten years will be the last important window for missions to China, a golden moment for new media ministry."

I was not trying to be prophetic. I did not foresee the harsh situation we would face today, but I simply felt the urgency of the great opportunity that new media brought to China missions. Ever since, I have been focused on the development, promotion, and study of new media ministry.

The Game Changer

Since the beginning of its reform and opening, China has never allowed the establishment of any Christian media, whether it be radio, television, newspapers, or magazines. Publishing, as an exception, has had a little space, but only under a pretext, like academic research or family counseling. For example, in 2010 I published a book in China that puts the stories of Joseph, Moses, and David in a contemporary context. It is classified as an inspirational book for young people.

However, beginning with Weibo (a Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter), social media has changed the game of mass communication. People are able to publish what they see and what they think without being vetted first, and that brings about a degree of freedom of speech to the Chinese. Moreover, it has created great space and opportunities for Christian evangelism.

In a 2015 survey of Christian content on Weibo, I summarized four main reasons why Chinese people do not believe in Christianity and offered suggestions for content creation on new media. I also proposed the concept of *Christian public communication*, advocating that "in various social environments and public contexts, we should accurately understand the scale of restrictions, find ways to accommodate, and earnestly respond to the felt needs of society."

The Crisis behind the Prosperity

The rise of WeChat in 2013 brought Christian media into a golden age of unprecedented prosperity. However, behind the prosperity a huge crisis loomed. We completed a large data analysis in 2017 which found that among the top five "Christian" WeChat accounts according to readership, four of them were operated by the

same troll farm.[1] The readership of these five accounts exceeded the combined readership of the following 95 accounts, but the content they disseminated was full of false information and serious deviations from biblical truth. As the saying goes, "bad money drives out good."

In 2018, we conducted an in-depth study of the content of certain WeChat public accounts with a clearer orthodox faith background. We found that besides the need to improve on certain technical aspects, such as formatting and design, the more important issue was that the content still generally lacked concern for public life and issues. It did not have the sensitivity or capacity to dialogue with the world. In other words, in this New Era, public theology is urgently needed by the Chinese church.[2]

The global pandemic of 2020 drove almost all churches online, and new media ministry received unprecedented attention. In less than eight months, I organized and attended over a hundred lectures and webinars, and in June of that year we published the anthology *Pause or Fast-Forward: The Church, New Media, and the 2020 Pandemic*.[3] All of these efforts were intended to help churches understand that the online-merge-offline (OMO) lifestyle is the trend for both technological and social development; the pandemic only served as an accelerator. Both as the church and in our evangelism, we must seriously consider and actively respond to this OMO development.

The Need for Public Theology

The second half of 2020 reminded us of the urgent need for a robust public theology in China. As the US presidential election approached, conspiracy theories and fake news of all kinds emerged, starting in the US.[4] However, soon hate-filled comments flooded social media platforms inside the Great Firewall as well as outside; WeChat saw the same kind of controversy and division as Facebook. This US event had a ripple effect through North American Chinese churches and right into the church in mainland China. Unfortunately, numerous Christians, church leaders, and media organizations, both inside China and outside, consciously or unconsciously, contributed to the spread of vicious and divisive statements, and some even put their political stance above their faith. All of this led to division among brothers and sisters, and a distorted witness before the watching world. Worst of all, some Christian YouTubers and influencers, who know how to generate substantial web traffic, made sensational and extreme statements that spread conspiracies they did not even believe. The "good money" was overtaken by "bad money" with the Chinese church's presence on social media looking little different from the US church in this way.

This phenomenon reflects the Chinese church's long-standing lack of sufficient understanding of media communication and new media. Even when the active use of new media is promoted within the church, the focus is usually only on the benefits and opportunities, ignoring the potential downsides and temptations involved. Not enough attention has been given to communication ethics and the nuances of public theology. Public theology is often highly sensitive, involving controversial topics that many churches and Christians choose to avoid discussing altogether. Those who do respond tend to do so in a fairly aggressive and radical way. There are relatively few resources available for developing a healthy framework for media communication and ethics, especially in Chinese. Furthermore, a truly Chinese public theology needs to be more contextualized, not simply taken from the Western world. The Chinese church has a long way to go in developing a healthy, holistic, and indigenous public theology.

Persecution Leads to Breakthrough

In May 2021, the Chinese government began a thorough purge of Christian content on WeChat public accounts,[5] and in March 2022 they began enforcing extremely stringent regulations.[6] Properly speaking, these

efforts were not specifically aimed against Christianity; they were the result of the overall tightening of freedom of expression in the New Era. Furthermore, over the past decade, religious content (including Christian content) has been purged and removed from all sorts of media platforms, from e-magazines to podcasts such as Ximalaya and Lizhi.[7] WeChat was certainly not the first, but simply the most recent target, although it has been the largest. In terms of book publishing, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain Chinese ISBNs,[8] and now it is almost impossible. Even books with all the appropriate legal permissions have been removed from shelves, and WeChat has begun deleting articles published long ago that have not been viewed in years. So, while this is the era of the rise and prosperity of new media, it is also the era of a sort of cat-and-mouse game with the government.

There is no doubt that the current harsh and seemingly all-consuming censorship is a huge blow to new media evangelism. Early on in this period, I found myself depressed and confused. But I also knew that in terms of new media development, the influence of WeChat has been declining year by year, particularly with the rise of short videos such as Douyin (China's TikTok) in 2017. As a new media-focused ministry, business transformation is inevitable. We attempted to incorporate short videos into our work but found that it was not suitable for our mainly literature-based editor team; we found ourselves in a bottleneck. Thus, external persecution can be a convenient excuse, but it does not really get at the root of our own growth problems.

An Opportunity in a Crisis

Gratefully, over the past year or so, the future direction of our ministry has become clearer: we are becoming a *new media-oriented publishing ministry* and a *publishing-oriented new media ministry*. We will apply the experience we have accumulated through a decade of new media ministry to publishing—providing fast, in-depth, and practical spiritual resources to the global Chinese church in a variety of formats, including electronic, physical, and audio. We will focus on responding to real-life issues and exploring a healthy and holistic public theology. We will also continue to focus on technology development, new media communication, art, and other related fields, making every effort to promote indigenous content creation and internet mission.

Just before the US Thanksgiving holiday in 2022, we held an online gathering to celebrate the publication of a collection of testimonies from Peking University graduates. The event was actually a new media crusade. Our Zoom room quickly maxed out at the 500-person limit, but then someone activated a livestream on WeChat, with some 1,400 people watching live on that platform. The event also had over 5,000 replays within a week, mainly in China. This was a great encouragement to us and proved once again the game changing nature of new media.

Over the past few years, we have also been glad to see many Christians starting to be more influential on Douyin, sharing Christian values and expressing their beliefs in ways that are not overtly religious. This is also true on other social media platforms and in publishing. So, there are still ways the church can continue to engage in the cat-and-mouse game at hand as we engage with an ever-changing media landscape. I believe that doing so will help Chinese Christians learn how to publicly express our faith, and begin to explore, practice, and develop a public theology. Of course, there is much work to be done: with China's strong cultural identity, long history, and 1.4 billion people, much effort is needed to prepare the soil and share the gospel effectively in contextually appropriate and indigenous ways.

The Next Ten Years

Today, ten years in, and in the immediate wake of the 20th National Congress, the White Paper Movement,[9] and the elimination of the zero-COVID policies, China's New Era has entered a new decade. For China-related

missions, we will likely see two major trends continue to develop. First, more Chinese people are emigrating overseas which opens up opportunities for evangelism among the diaspora.[10] Second, for the greater part of the Chinese population that stays in China, in the face of continuous economic restructuring and increasingly stringent social control, there will be more desire for freedom and more reflection on the meaning of life. Among both groups, the need for evangelism, pastoral care, and public theology has never been more urgent or enormous than it is today. Once again, I am not trying to be prophetic, but in all these aspects, I recognize that new media—a true game changer—will continue to play an active and even more important role in the next ten years of the New Era.

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[1] Similarly, research has shown that in 2019, nineteen out of the top twenty "Christian" Facebook pages in the US were run by troll farms. The implications are similar. See Tyler Huckabee, "In 2019, Almost All of Facebook's Top Christian Pages Were Run by Foreign Troll Farms," *Relevant Magazine,* September 28, 2021, accessed February 13, 2023, https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/tech-gaming/almost-all-of-facebooks-top-christian-pages-are-run-by-foreign-troll-farms/.

[2] Read more about the 2017 and 2018 findings in Jerry An, "Here's What Thousands of Christian WeChat Accounts Reveal about Chinese Internet Evangelism," *Christianity Today,* May 13, 2022, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/wechat-public-accounts-chinese-evangelism-censorship.html.

[3] This e-book《暂停还是快进》is available in Chinese only at https://ebook.endao.co/book-619#.

[4] Interestingly, a dominant source of such conspiracy theories surrounding the US election was the *Epoch Times*, a newspaper company based in New York and affiliated with the Chinese religious movement Falun Gong. The nature of new media is that it transcends geographic boundaries. For more on the role of the *Epoch Times*, see Kevin Rouse, "How the Epoch Times Created a Giant Influence Machine," *New York Times,* October 24, 2020, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/technology/epoch-times-influence-falun-gong.html.

[5] Read about ReFrame's experience with this purge in Jerry An and Heather Haveman, "New Media, New Direction," *ChinaSource Blog*, December 27, 2021, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/new-media-new-direction/.

[6] For an overview of all the major national-level changes in laws and regulations in China that have impacted Christians and the church during the New Era, including the March 2022 changes, see the ChinaSource summary, "A Reader's Guide to Laws and Regulations of the New Era," *ChinaSource Quarterly* 24, no. 4, (2022), accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/a-readers-guide-to-laws-and-regulations-of-the-new-era/.

[7] Ximalaya 喜马拉雅（www.ximalaya.com）, started in 2012 in Shanghai, is China's largest online audio-streaming platform. Founded two years earlier in Guangzhou, Lizhi 荔枝（www.lizhi.fm）is China's second largest podcasting and audio app.

[8] The International Standard Book Number (ISBN) system is used by mainland China, but unlike other markets, acquiring an ISBN for a specific book requires a domestic publishing house and a review of the manuscript. The manuscript review process allows for significant censorship of the content that gets approved. Books with ISBNs secured in other countries, including the US, are not permitted in the mainland Chinese market.

[9] For a brief background on this movement, see Billy Perrigo, "Why a Blank Sheet of Paper Became a Protest Symbol in China," *Time,* December 1, 2022, accessed January 31, 2023, https://time.com/6238050/china-protests-censorship-urumqi-a4/.

[10] Throughout 2022, Chinese social media saw a surge in posts related to "run philosophy," a way of talking about emigrating. Although emigration was difficult, many still found ways out. (See, for example, Vincent Ni, "'Run Philosophy': The Chinese Citizens Seeking to Leave amid Covid Uncertainty," *The Guardian*, July 20, 2022, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/20/run-philosophy-the-chinese-citizens-seeking-to-leave-amid-covid-uncertainty.) Now in early 2023, as China's borders begin to open up in the post-zero-COVID season, many who have tried to leave may finally have the opportunity.

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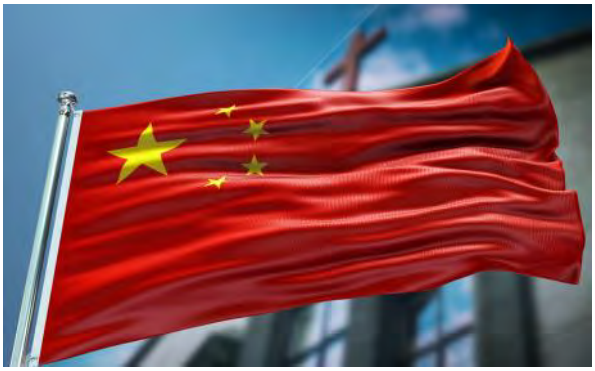
Ministry Insights under a Nationalistic Trend

By John Zhang



John Zhang lives in southern China and over the years has been involved in a variety of Christian ministries. Currently he is an active member of a think tank studying the importance of cultural shift in considering new ministry strategies for missionary training and evangelism.

The past decade (2013–2022) has been filled with changes in China. With the start of President Xi's term as China's leader, we had great hopes and were expecting a new normal with a strong anti-corruption focus, One Belt, One Road initiative (OBOR) engagement,[1] and steps to realize the "China Dream."[2] However, things have changed dramatically. The disengagement between China and the West occurred not only in socio-economic areas, but also in education, religion, social media, and many other areas. Like a ship, China has sailed into uncertain waters. What is happening? Why is it happening? How can we serve Jesus in this New Era?

Certain factors are the result of accumulated impact from the past, such as the one-child policy, positions taken on Taiwan, Xinjiang, and others; some are unique new factors under the rule of President Xi. These factors have been amplified with the recent three-year lockdown due to COVID-19. This article hopes to explore these factors from two perspectives. First, the changes in China are not merely one particular leader's own agenda. Rather, it is an accumulation of cultural factors over the past forty years. Second, the nature of the lie that is manipulating the nation. For more than seventy years, we have connected China with Communism. Rather, we should recognize that nationalism, possibly being presented in the name of socialism or communism, has become a main ideological thread. I hope the exploration of these factors will provide insights for gospel ministry in the coming decade.

Observations on Recent Developments

The first significant change is the attitude towards the West, particularly the United States. With the introduction of the Overseas NGO Regulations[3] and a few other laws, there is little space for internationals, especially Westerners, to operate in China as before. Not just officials, but the entire society has turned against Westerners. People are screening textbooks, from elementary school to university, to eliminate possible "Western influence." One British photographer complained that he was reported to the police as an "American spy" when he was taking pictures at a public train station; this had never happened to him before during his fifteen years of residence in China. A local Chinese girl wearing a Japanese dress was accused of "being shameless." Public intellectuals, if they used any speech considered not so "Chinese," would be labelled as "followers of the West" or sometimes "worshipers of Japanese." All problems are considered to have an "American root," no matter whether they deal with Xinjiang, Tibet, or the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The West is depicted as being an alliance against China.

Unfortunately, Christianity is viewed as a tool used by the West to subvert China. No matter what foreign workers claim to do, they are described as hypocritical (with a hidden, second mind or agenda, which is the original meaning of this word). This hostile attitude is not only that of top leaders and diplomats ("wolf warriors"), but also of TikTok, short-video presenters, and retired grandpas. It is hard to believe that all instructions, such as reviewing college textbooks for potential "Western influence," come directly from President Xi. There are a multitude of supporters or initiators of this attitude in society.

Another viewpoint expressed is that of "the rising of the East (China) and the decline of the West" seen in the economy, in science and technology, and in many other areas. China, as the manufacturer for the whole world, has become of vital importance. It is true that Chinese personnel and influence, both at the national level and in the private sector, are becoming more and more visible. China has also claimed to have eliminated absolute poverty. In Xi Jinping's journey towards the "Great Revival" (伟大复兴） of the Chinese nation,[4] China is invincible. This view has been articulated in public meetings by high officials as well as in family gatherings of ordinary people.

With strong control on social media and surveillance technologies everywhere, news about many social problems only survives a few days, or a few hours, and then is drowned out in the mainstream of positive, victorious, and decisive messages. No opposition voices, even questions, are heard or allowed. Indeed, all messages can be traced back and become a liability.

It seems that, within these past ten years, China has switched to a totally different track—one of nationalism. It is not just the attitudes of high-level officials that have changed but also the expressions of the common people in society.

Reasons for the Changes

Many analysts say that China, under the leadership of President Xi, has turned towards the "Left Wing," towards more traditional communism. This is seen in the governing role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as in the intentional interference, or even suppression, of the private sector in commerce. Compared to the previous two decades, the governing system and its leaders are less tolerant of non-mainstream thoughts or voices.

In a recent official statement, President Xi added the phrase "Chinese excellent traditional culture" into the previous formula of "Marxism plus Chinese context," a traditional expression used from Mao's time into the twenty-first century.[5] This newly added phrase is the key to explain the changes. Nationalism, in a Chinese ethnocentric fashion, has become the core of today's ideology.

In this way, it is easy to understand that OBOR takes both a Western colonization approach and the traditional Chinese empire's demonstration approach. From an economic perspective, it is important to focus on the resources in OBOR; however, giving up business benefits to demonstrate the glory and power of the Middle Kingdom is not a failure. At this point, "demonstration" is more important than "colonization" to the leaders.

Similarly, we can also understand why President Xi would concentrate power to himself alone, and why he cannot admit failure in any matter (the COVID-19 lock-down policy and the Xiong'an Special District,[6] for example). Traditional Chinese culture is rooted in Confucianism. The Confucian hierarchy determines the nation's leadership hierarchy, as well as the CCP-only governance structure. There can be no mistake or failure in such a structure. Success (efficiency, acceptance, win, and so on) is the basis of power and authority. Particularly for China with historic failures in living memory, the "Four-Confidences" (Road Confidence, Theory Confidence, Institution Confidence, and Culture Confidence)[7] also carry a subtle hint of inferiority by comparison with other parties. Thus, it becomes easy to understand why media control is so strict that bad news, such as the story of a chained trafficked woman,[8] is quickly put down—it would bring shame to the hierarchy and make it less glorious in comparison to the West.

Implications for Christian Ministry

It is hard to say whether it is this leader who is initiating the changes, or whether it is the multitude who force

the leader into the changes. Nevertheless, we have a whole generation moving in this new direction. This is not the result of just one leader or a small group of elites. Instead, it has taken at least a decade to incubate this nationalistic trend. It would not make a major difference even if the leader were changed. Therefore, we should give our full attention to address this shift in our ministries. It would be naïve to just pray to have a certain official or scholar changed.

Christian churches, agencies, and individuals are not immune from these changes—ultimately believers and non-believers live in the same culture and soil, watch the same news, experience the same struggles. To some extent, the "right" thinking pattern exists in our operations, management, and life. What we observe in society, sooner or later, will be expressed in local ministries, unless it has been specifically addressed with intentional biblical truth.

As China gained economic advantages, Christianity started to be viewed as a threat or opponent like other products from the West. Ironically, the Christian faith was not a Western product in its very beginning. Is it possible to present the gospel without a Western format? The CCP has been calling for "contextualized Christianity"[9] for years, although it might have had a different meaning than the standard missiological meaning. Chinese churches usually view this as a threat to authentic theology. But eventually, we will see the results: perhaps a new Bible translation; perhaps a nationalistic, charismatic leader representing churches but accepted or even encouraged by officials. To some extent, the house church movement was already such a contextualized expression in the 1960s and 1970s without much explicit intervention from the outside. Could such a process take place again in this New Era?

The way of understanding church, the way of worship, the way of mission, the way of governance, the way of education—many local leaders are struggling with these, particularly when they face the clash between their Western-style seminary study with their local ministry context.

This will also require Western mission workers to take on a humble attitude when entering such a protective society or community, not necessarily as a helper or teacher, but as a servant (slave) to be used by the host nation while the gospel is being lived out. The traditional evangelical purpose-driven or project- or program-oriented mindset needs to be transformed.

Today in mission mobilization efforts, many speakers, both international and mainland Chinese, are using the same appeal to speak to Chinese churches or agencies: the rise of local Chinese churches both in quantity and in finance, the difficulty for Westerners in some hard places, and so on. You (that is, we) Chinese are the finishers of the great commission task.[10] Such logic does not have any biblical foundation at all. Instead, it tries to add honor to Chinese churches in a nationalistic way. Particularly when a sending mission is involved with China's OBOR initiative, this motivation should be checked in advance—are we trying to borrow the strong influence of the state in order to make our entry or mission work easier?

This also applies to leaders' formation and transformation. Like secular leaders, many ministry leaders are already taking the same pattern in governance, in succession, in the decision-making process, and in self-protection when facing failure or mistakes. They pursue the same types of success in size, in funding, in fast-paced growth. Watching what is happening at the national level, it gives us an opportunity to see as if we are looking in a mirror.

Many of these thoughts could be traced to evolutionism, to a Cold-War mindset, or to modernism. For example, people believe everything is either black or white, without a third option; people believe it is either win or lose with no win-win scenario; people use very pragmatic approaches to achieve results, without due attention to the process.

It seems that it is not a clash between the East and the West. The majority of the anti-West community has been educated in a Western style and Western content. Indeed, most of them are not very familiar with traditional Chinese culture, at times even less acquainted than some Western mission workers. Their logic, expression, and focal point are the same as Chinese society as a whole and from the same Western educational and cultural root. This happened in the 1920s during the Anti-Christian Movement.[11] Both now and a century ago, the clash is not on the essence of gospel, but on the cultural (mis)understanding that Christianity is a tool of Western culture.

We are not in the worst position. God does not promise us our preferred best environment. The turbulence we experience, most often, is uncomfortable enough to wake us up from our own agenda so that we may again look upon the Lord who has chosen us and also sent us. May his kingdom expand!

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[1] When first introduced in 2013 this initiative was called One Belt One Road (OBOR). In Chinese this is 一带一路. Later in 2016, the official English name was changed to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but the Chinese name remained the same. This has been a centerpiece of Chinese foreign policy in the past decade.

[2] The "China Dream" was used by President Xi just after his appointment in 2012. According to President Xi the "China Dream" is the "great, great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴). Subsequently, it frequently appeared in speeches, public announcements, and education curriculum.

[3] This law came into effect in January 2017. See Brent Fulton, "Milestones in the Evolution of China's Overseas NGO Law," *ChinaSource Blog*, February 15, 2017, accessed February 2, 2023, https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/milestones-in-the-evolution-of-chinas-overseas-ngo-law/.

[4] See Elizabeth Economy, Introduction to *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*, 1-19. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. An excerpt is available on the Council on Foreign Relations website at https://on.cfr.org/3DROu3C, accessed February 23, 2023.

[5] On the 100th anniversary of the CCP (July 1, 2021), President Xi said that we should insist on integrating the basic principles of Marxism, the Chinese context, and Chinese excellent traditional culture. See习近平. **在**庆祝中国共产党成立100**周年大会上的**讲话" **新**华网, July 15, 2021, accessed January 25, 2023, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-07/15/c_1127658385.htm. Original Chinese expression: 坚持把马克思主义基本原理同中国具体实际相结合、同中华优秀传统文化相结合.

[6] There has been little explanation regarding the change of the COVID-19 lockdown policy since December 2022. Even though almost everyone in society would acknowledge it is a bad policy, the CCP could not admit it was wrong or even had defects. Xiong'an District, located south of Beijing, was announced to be the new administrative center for Beijing. With tens of billions of dollars being invested in this district, the region still stands like a ghost town.

[7] In 2012, former President Hu stated that there were three confidences: Road Confidence, Theory Confidence, and Institutional Confidence. In 2016, President Xi added Culture Confidence, indicating his emphasis on culture.

[8] For background on this incident, see Chauncey Jung, "Xuzhou's Chained Woman Highlights China's Human Trafficking Problem," *The Diplomat,* February 23, 2022, accessed February 7, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/xuzhous-chained-woman-highlights-chinas-human-trafficking-problem/.

[9] This falls under the banner of Sinicization of religion. See "The Sinicization of Religion," *Chinese Church Voices: ChinaSource Blog,* December 5, 2017, accessed February 2, 2023, https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/the-sinicization-of-religion/.

[10] The Back to Jerusalem Movement in the 1980s used this appeal a lot.

[11] 非基运动，1922–1925. See "Anti-Christian Movement (China)," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 30, 2023, accessed February 2, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Christian_Movement_(China).

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Pastors in China's New Era

By Sarah Lee

Image credit: Joshua Fernandez via UnSplash.

This article is an abridged version of "Adapting in Difficult Circumstances: Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect" by Sarah Lee and Kevin J. O'Brien, published in Journal of Contemporary China *in 2021.*[1]

Since 2012, life has become more difficult for religious believers in China. However, in accounting for those harmed by the Xi administration's new policies, there is one tendency we ought to avoid: treating them solely as victims. Even relatively powerless people are subjects as well as objects and retain agency[2] of their own. In other words, there is a bottom-up element to the Xi effect, and the consequences of leadership change are mutually constituted by society and the state.

Protestantism showcases the dynamic between leadership initiative and societal adaptation particularly well because of its complicated relationship with the Communist Party.[3] The Party has always been wary of Protestants for three main reasons. First, their religious faith is viewed as an ideological threat because they are loyal to an authority other than the Party. The transformative faith of many Chinese Protestants is seen to be in competition with ideological teachings of the atheist ruling party.[4] Second, Protestant churches raise the specter of foreign influence. As China's defeat in the First Opium War in 1842 and the resulting Treaty of Nanking forcibly legalized Christian evangelism, the religion has served as a painful reminder of Western imperialism and China's national humiliation.[5] Since 1949, nearly every law and regulation related to religion has emphasized the need to root out foreign influence[6] and make churches "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating."[7] Third, Protestant churches are thought to be a collective action threat because they regularly organize and mobilize followers and comprise a vibrant civil society.[8] This threat is amplified by China's history of protests and a Leninist fear of organizations outside Party control. Combined with a competing belief system and foreign ties, Protestant believers' desire to gather together to worship, and their willingness to take to the streets when they are stopped from doing so, make them a potential source of social and political instability.

The Xi administration has adopted a raft of repressive religious regulations, some of which were implemented specifically to hold Protestants in line. To start with, the Party has sought to maintain its ideological primacy by monitoring sermons. Many pastors before Xi's rise speculated about occasional unannounced visits by local officials to observe their Sunday sermons,[9] but the recent installation of security cameras inside buildings, including church sanctuaries, has turned this into an everyday reality.[10] The government has detained an increasing number of Protestant ministers that speak out against demolition of crosses, religious persecution, and limitations on religious autonomy.[11]

The Xi administration has also sought to combat the perceived security threat arising from Protestants' ties to foreign countries.[12] Whereas regulations prior to Xi laid out general rules for handling financial transactions and internal accounting, a 2018 measure specifically required registered churches to "derive their funding solely from legitimate sources" (*zijin laiyuan qudao hefa*),[13] and to only accept overseas donations under 10,000 yuan (US$1462) that are in "accordance with relevant provisions."[14] Foreign donors, in addition to for-

eign money, are also being increasingly segregated from domestic Protestants, as regulations require separate locations for worship and forbid foreigners from proselytizing Chinese nationals.[15]

Finally, the Party has addressed the collective action potential present in big groups by shuttering hundreds of churches.[16] Officials have also banned domestic and international "praise conferences" (*zanmei juhui)*, leadership seminars, and missionary work meetings while blocking travel by pastors to assist small rural churches or to participate in conferences abroad.[17] In addition to discouraging physical gatherings, the authorities have increased monitoring of online religious activities. Pastors reported that the intensity of surveillance had increased markedly in recent years in addition to the employment of high tech tools.

In this repressive environment, many Protestant ministers receive signals from the government about acceptable behavior, reconfigure what they hear to be compatible with their faith and church-building, and then translate policies and guidelines for their congregations. Without ever being able to prove they are innocent of all the charges leveled against them, these pastors actively seek to allay concerns that Protestantism generates an ideological, security, and collective action threat to the regime.

Ideological Threat

One way pastors strive to show Protestantism is ideologically harmless is through the content of their sermons. Pastors with close ties to officialdom are notorious for their anodyne sermons filled with innocuous moral lessons. In contrast, pastors from unregistered churches are more likely to preach about God's kingdom, the resurrection, and the afterlife. Even so, most of them also stay away from issues that might suggest frustration with Party rule or divided loyalties. Many interviewees distinguished between suitable subjects for sermons—such as love and filial piety—and worldly matters with which the church should not (and need not) concern itself.[18]

Moreover, these pastors also demonstrate that their beliefs are compatible with Party policies by dissociating themselves from activists who speak out against religious restrictions. When asked about ministers who challenged the regime for its human rights violations, many interviewees argued that they were "doing politics" (*gao zhengzhi*) and not ministry while others offered qualified support but distanced themselves from such acts.

Beyond steering clear of politics and activists, some seek to dispel concerns that they hold anti-government views by attributing repression to missteps they or their fellow pastors had made. Some interviewees also claimed tighter control of religion was understandable given the upsurge in the number of Protestants and the difficulties of ruling such a large and diverse country. For them, the best way for pastors to reduce this ideological concern was to watch what they preached, keep a safe distance from dissidents, and even come to believe in (or at least profess to believe in) the Party's approach to religion. Whether what they say and do always reflect their real views is an open question, but whatever the case, the accommodations they make help shape Protestant practice on the ground.

Security Threat

Additionally, many are aggressively shedding connections to foreign countries that lead churches to be perceived as a security threat. To free their churches of outside influence and achieve self-sufficiency, many pastors were focused on finding and training more domestic staff so that Chinese congregants could take on positions once held by missionaries.[19] Other interviewees emphasized how they had reduced reliance on foreign donations.[20] All of these efforts have taken many Protestant churches closer to the Three-Self principles prioritized by the Party.[21]

Beyond revamping their staffing and financing, pastors are also reducing communication and ties with foreigners. Interviewees were fully aware of the government's stance on foreign influence. When asked about how to avoid government interference in running their churches, pastors frequently mentioned not involving missionaries in church affairs and not inviting foreign pastors to give sermons. One interviewee whose education was heavily influenced by American missionaries said that he no longer allowed visits by overseas ministers to the point of being perceived by them as a "heretic" (*yiduan*).[22] In this way, many interviewees proudly claimed to have severed all international connections and felt confident this would serve them well at the next government inspection.[23]

These actions are more than a response to regulations designed to reduce foreign influence. They also reflect a degree of buy-in to the larger project of Sinicizing Christianity.[24] Many interviewees expressed growing pride and determination to minister to a purely Chinese church. Although Chinese Protestantism still bears the imprint of missionary efforts and still partly benefits from overseas assistance, most pastors are just as ready to argue that the era when foreign guidance and help was needed has run its course.[25]

Collective Action Threat

Many pastors have sought to address concerns about collective action by splitting their congregations into smaller groups. After being forced to relocate several times, one pastor decided to turn his church into several house churches.[26] Another pastor described a protocol he drew up detailing where and when his congregation should meet in the event of a raid.[27] Some pastors did question the wisdom and practicality of separating into smaller churches, noting that a dollop of security was gained at the cost of losing the decorum and formality of collective worship,[28] but many said this was a tradeoff worth making.

Many are also refraining from building and taking part in cross-church networks.[29] This has not always been the case. In the early 2000s, church leaders often came together to host conferences, organize seminars for Chinese students studying abroad, and engage in community outreach across different regions. In the Xi era, however, pastors have begun to break off relations with other ministers and their congregations. One of the motives for severing ties with fellow pastors is fear of repercussions. More than a few had experienced the authorities stymieing network-building, as attempts to participate in a multi-church forum were thwarted by the local police and permission to travel to an overseas conference was revoked at the airport and instead brought on threats to close their church.

Breaking up congregations and cutting ties to other churches are more than a reaction to repressive policies. Many interviewees argued that big churches are not suitable for China, as smaller congregations allow believers to have closer interactions and form deeper personal relationships with each other. Some saw value in not emulating pastors who sought to increase the number of congregants and construct large church buildings.[30] They believed that God had "blessed" (*zhufu*) China with modest-sized churches which kept them safe, reduced the risk of permanent closure, and promoted the development of Chinese Christianity.

Conclusion

For some pastors, these accommodations are simply an effort to hang on in the face of growing repression. They and their churches are doing what they must do to survive in a difficult position.[31] For many of our interviewees, however, there is also a larger purpose at work. Experiencing and figuring out how to adapt to repression is said to be a part of God's grand plan. These pastors may be deluded about their ability to dispel the threats the Party perceives, and they may not be able to create much more space for their churches to operate. But they do seem to believe that God is giving them a trial, and that in the end they will emerge stronger than before. This is rooted in a worldview that accords both the government and believers a critical

role in fulfilling God's design for Chinese Christianity.

As these Protestant pastors are perched between the authorities and a congregation, translating new strictures into action, they have become willing (or unwilling) partners in making the regime's policies real. In the best-case scenario, these pastors are suggesting a path toward mutual co-existence and the tamping down of conflict. Our interviewees were certainly doing everything they could to diminish the perception that Protestantism is a threat and to persuade their congregations that new restrictions do not matter much for what is important about being a Christian. Still, accommodation has taken place almost exclusively on one side, as pastors steer away from anything conceivably oppositional and seek to put the lie to the idea that they are the firebrands they are portrayed to be.[32] Unfortunately, there are few indications so far that their efforts have been noticed or will elicit a positive response. Our interviewees have accepted the hand that the Party has dealt them but are still waiting for signs that the regime may work with them to slot Protestantism into a less contentious political landscape.

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[1] This is an abridged version of Lee and O'Brien's 2021 article. The first author conducted 120 semi-structured interviews with Protestant pastors in fifteen cities in China between 2017 and 2019. Interviewees were affiliated with both unregistered house churches and registered Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches in several coastal provinces and the southwest. See Sarah Lee and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Adapting in Difficult Circumstances: Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect," *The Journal of Contemporary China* 30 (2021): 132, 902-914, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1893556.

[2] I borrow Sibeon's (1999) definition of agency as used in political science to refer to the "capacity to act upon situations." Paul A. Lewis, "Agency, Structure and Causality in Political Science: A Comment on Sibeon," *Politics* 22, no. 1, (2002), 17.

[3] Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Marie-Eve Reny, *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[4] Heike Holbig, "Ideology after the End of Ideology. China and the Quest for Autocratic Legitimation," *Democratization* 20, no. 1, (2013), 64; Benjamin Kang Lim and Ben Blanchard, "Xi Jinping Hopes Traditional Faiths Can Fill Moral Void in China: Sources," *Reuters*, September 29, 2013, accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-vacuum/xi-jinping-hopes-traditional-faiths-can-fill-moral-void-in-china-sources-idUSBRE98S0GS20130929.

[5] David H. Adeney, *China: The Church's Long March* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1985), 33; Carsten Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 28.

[6] "Constitution of the People's Republic of China," Article 36, 1982, accessed March 1, 2023, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/constitution2019/201911/1f65146fb6104dd3a2793875d19b5b29.shtml; "Regulations on Religious Affairs," Chapter I, Article 4, 2004, State Administration of Religious Affairs, accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regulations-on-religious-affairs; "Regulations on Religious Affairs," Chapter I, Article 5, 2017, State Council of the People's Republic of China, accessed March 1, 2023, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm, unofficial English translation, accessed March 1, 2023 https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/religious-affairs-regulations-2017/; "White Paper—Freedom of Religious Belief in China," Section IV, Beijing: 1997, accessed February 23, 2023, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xnyfgk/200310/t20031023_4501075.htm.

[7] This is a guiding principle for all TSPM churches in China as laid out in the Constitution of the National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China. *Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui zhangcheng*, National Religious Affairs Administration (*guojia zongjiao shiwuju*), November 30, 2018, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/52.

[8] Civil society is often discussed in relation to democracies and democratization though the direction of relationship is still up for debate. See Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[9] A pastor (Interview PYB11887, Beijing, 2017) noted, "Since my church is small, I notice visitors sitting in the congregation. It's only after the church was closed down that I realized he was probably sent by the government."

[10] Anna Fifield, "With Wider Crackdowns on Religion, Xi's China Seeks to Put State Stamp on Faith," *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2018, accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-wider-crackdowns-on-religion-xis-china-seeks-to-put-state-stamp-on-faith/2018/09/15/b035e704-b7f0-11e8-b79f-

f6e31e555258_story.html.

[11] Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church, for instance, was jailed in 2019 after voicing disapproval online of the government's mistreatment of house churches and for drafting a petition to separate church and state and increase religious freedom. Paul Mozur and Ian Johnson, "China Sentences Wang Yi, Christian Pastor, to 9 Years in Prison," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2019, accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/30/world/asia/china-wang-yi-christian-sentence.html.

[12] Xi's efforts to root out foreign influence are a continuation of policies that trace back to the creation of the TSPM organization in 1954.

[13] Article 20, *2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs.*

[14] Article 57, *2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs*. These provisions specify the level of government to report donations, depending on their size. They also define acceptable donations to be those that "do not attach political conditions and do not interfere with China's religious affairs." *Guanyu jieshou jingwai zongjiao zuzhi he geren juanzeng shenpi quanxian wenti de tongzhi*, State Administration for Religious Affairs (*Guowuyuan zongjiao shiwuju*), July 30, 1993, accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.pkulaw.com/chl/cdfeec2e72a32cd3bdfb.html.

[15] Article 17, "Rules for the implementation of the provisions on the administration of religious activities of aliens within the territory of the People's Republic of China," State Administration for Religious Affairs, January 11, 2011, accessed March 7, 2023, http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=1673&CGid=.

[16] ChinaAid Association, "2018 Annual Report: Chinese Government Persecution of Churches and Christians in Mainland China," accessed March 7, 2023, https://www.chinaaid.org/p/annual-persecution-reports.html.

[17] Pastors reported being limited to ministering in specific cities. International travel was often blocked through visa denials or in person at the airport. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government was able to employ additional methods to restrict meetings of all kinds. Interview with pastor PYS11907, eastern province, 2017.

[18] Reny reports a pastor saying that he "believed he could criticize the government, but not in the church." She finds, however, that pastors typically refrain from mentioning politics and also try to show that there is no "political intention" underlying their religious practice. Marie-Eve Reny, "Compliant Defiance: Informality and Survival among Protestant House Churches in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(111), (2018), 482.

[19] Interview with pastor PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019.

[20] One pastor described how the rent for his church buildings was paid off the previous year by a generous offering from a wealthy congregant. Interview with pastor PYC11698, northeastern province, 2018.

[21] The Three-Self principles for churches to be "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating" were initially articulated and supported by the foreign missionary community and later became the Party's guiding principles for religious organizations.

[22] Interview with pastor PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019.

[23] Some interviewees valued support provided by foreign Protestants. Pastors who maintained ties with overseas churches tended to be more antagonistic towards the Party and more outspoken in fighting for religious rights. Vala suggests possible variation by type of church and a pastor's age. He argues that young pastors in TSPM churches are more willing to learn from and cooperate with foreigners because they have "no memory of pre-1949 foreign exploitation, reject the anti-foreign perspective…and see considerable benefits in foreign cooperation." Carsten Vala, "Protestant Resistance and Activism in China's Official Churches," in Teresa Wright, ed., *Handbook of Protest and Religion in China,* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 319.

[24] Sinicization of Christianity is part of a broader Sinicization effort by the Xi administration to assimilate ethnic and religious groups while promoting Chinese culture. See, for example, David R. Stroup, "Why Xi Jinping's Xinjiang Policy Is a Major Change in China's Ethnic Politics," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2019. In the case of Protestantism, the campaign encourages Chinese over Western hymns, incorporates Chinese-style architecture into churches, advocates that pastors wear traditional Chinese garb, inserts Chinese folktales into the Bible, and displays the national flag at all times. "Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity (tuijin *woguo jidujiao zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao*), 2018-2022," *jidujiao quanguo lianghui* (CCCTSPM), December 2017, accessed March 7, 2023, http://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283; *Hualongqu jidujiao, tianzhujiao zongjiao tuanti kaizhan "sitongyi" huodong changyishu*', *Hualongqu jidujiao xiehui* and *Hualongqu tianzhujiao aiguohui*, May 15, 2019, accessed March 7, 2023, http://hlq.rootinhenan.com/rootinhenan/html/2019/5/12111.htm.

[25] The increase in deportations of missionaries in recent years has made the end of this era even more clear. According to the Korea World Missions Association (KWMA)'s 2019 Report on Mission Work Statistics, the number of missionaries in China decreased by over 400 due to "involuntary movement" of missionaries out of China during that year. Another organization estimated more than 2,000 deportations between 2018 and the first half of 2020. Korea World Missions Association, *2019 Report on Mission Work Statistics*.

[26] Interview with pastor PYS11618, northeastern province, 2018.

[27] Interview with pastor PYQ11519, southwestern province, 2019.
[28] These ministers were worried that worshipping in homes on weekdays without ordained pastors would lead congregants to forget the correct order of worship (prayer, hymns, sermon, benediction) and they would just share what was happening in their lives, pray and eat, and then go their separate ways.
[29] Koesel similarly found that churches were kept small and "self-contained, rather than being dependent on other units," and argued that this was done to protect the larger network of churches to which individual churches belonged. Karrie Koesel, "The Rise of a Chinese House Church: The Organizational Weapon," *The China Quarterly* 215, (2013), 584.
[30] Several said that the cross-demolition campaign in Wenzhou was proof that God was reprimanding those who had gone astray by constructing grandiose buildings.
[31] Reny argues that pastors are engaging in "compliant defiance" and following informal rules to "earn respect and reassure those officials they are not a threat to political stability." Reny, "Compliant Defiance," 473 (See above, note 18).
[32] This view is common in Party accounts and also in the international press. Our interviewees are more reminiscent of recipients of the state-sanctioned "National Outstanding Lawyer Award," who distance themselves from activist lawyers engaged in rights-protection work. See Lawrence J. Liu and Rachel E. Stern, "State-adjacent Professionals: How Chinese Lawyers Participate in Political Life," *The China Quarterly*, 247 (2020), 793-813, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/stateadjacent-professionals-how-chinese-lawyers-participate-in-political-life/A090DD6A9B32135C50A66A552CC511E3.

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One Family's Experience of the New Era

By Peter Bryant

What has the New Era been like thus far for Chinese believers who have lived through the previous one? The best way to understand this is to talk with individuals about their own experiences. I want to invite you into the living room of a family I have known for the last decade. You can hear from them what we discussed one afternoon over multiple cups of Chinese tea. My friends graciously allowed me to record our conversation to be able to share it with you.

Aaron and Jennie[1] are not originally from Beijing. Aaron came to Beijing from southern China to study in the university and stayed to work. Jennie is originally from western China. Growing up she dreamed of studying at Peking University but was not able to get in. After university she worked as a journalist and then quit her job to come to Beijing to work. Aaron and Jennie met and married in Beijing. One issue they faced was Jennie's faith. Jennie had become a Christian at the university. Both came from families where their parents were not believers and were opposed to Jennie's faith. When they were considering marriage, Aaron's future mother-in-law told him he should listen to Jennie but not about her faith.

When I asked how he became a Christian, Aaron said that it was God's sovereign choice and action that allowed him to believe and know God. Jennie did have an impact on Aaron coming to Christ, and he began to believe in God. Aaron sees that God was faithful to take his initial belief and deepen it. The church they were attending together also played a role in Aaron's journey of belief and faith. He mentioned one song God used in a special way in his life. Jennie shared that the church sang this song each week to welcome new visitors. The song is "Jesus Loves You"[2] and its first line is "Do you know of the never changing promise? And it says, 'Jesus loves you.'"

Over the last ten years they have attended several different house churches with Aaron serving as an elder and a small group leader in each church they attended. They have experienced the rapid growth of the urban church, seeing one group go from a small house group to over 500 people. In the last few years, they have also seen a large church have to go back to meeting as a network of home groups as the government has put more pressure on the church.

When we talked about the church situation, they mentioned many examples of tightening restrictions for the in-person meetings including breaking up larger churches and persecution of pastors and other leaders. In recent years this tightening has also been seen in the online world as more materials have been removed or restricted on the internet and social media platforms. Asked about what to expect going forward, Aaron shared that he felt that the COVID-19 pandemic of the past three years had distracted the government with more urgent pandemic control issues. He feels with China moving past a focus on controlling COVID-19, there will be increasing pressure on churches and Christians. He was not optimistic about any relaxation in what churches and people have experienced in recent years.

Aaron and Jennie have three children. Their oldest is in senior high school. Although this family size is the government's current goal for families, this was not the case when their children were born.[3] In a decade they have gone from being criticized and penalized to being a role model for families having children.

As the first Christians in their families, Aaron and Jennie had grown up with a materialistic worldview and started following Christ as young adults. Their children have an entirely different experience where they have known about God all their lives. God has been an integrated part of their lives, education, and childhood experiences. Their children have been educated in the normal Chinese public school system. They felt the educational system offered a good education to their children without a lot of compromises, and this had been true until recent years. Initially their children could make known their beliefs among their classmates at school, and there were no issues or pressure from other students or teachers.

Now that their older children are into secondary education and with the increasing ideological content in the educational curriculum, their children are facing more situations of tensions between what they believe as a family and what is being taught at school. The covid restrictions reduced these conflicts somewhat, since for much of the time during the past three years classes have been online, and it was easier to ignore some of the content that created problems when the teaching was virtual.

They now face a situation where their older children have someone in their class responsible for monitoring political correctness. Teachers present content that they do not agree with, especially regarding worldview or politics. For example, children are taught they should have unconditional support for and obedience to the Party. Their oldest child, while mild mannered, has found his own ways to deal with some of the issues. On some tests, where there is a question requiring an answer with which he cannot agree, he will choose to skip the question (and lose those points on the exam). This has forced him to work harder to make sure he gets enough points on other questions. His teachers have allowed this so far as long as it does not negatively affect other students, but it is hard to watch. They have increasing concerns about their children's experiences at school.

During their lifetimes they have seen some of the best years China has had in the past century as standards of living, education, travel, and personal freedom have reached new heights. They have experienced the hard work of millions of Chinese that has resulted in the increased prosperity and openness seen today. However, in recent years, they have become more pessimistic about the future. They used a Chinese proverb[4] of things becoming worse year by year to express their feelings about the future. They feel China is on a path similar to the one taken by Mao Zedong and feel this will not be good for their country. They are concerned about the direction their country is taking as they see China's reputation falling in many countries around the world. They worry and are pessimistic about their children's future if China continues this new trend of development.

They experienced the rapid growth of urban house churches when they first became Christians. They have also seen the situation change dramatically in the past decade. The covid restrictions did not help as many churches could not meet in person for more than a year. They knew of one church with over 1,000 members where, after COVID-19, they are down to less than 300. The bigger impact has been because of increasing government pressure and restrictions.

Jennie felt that too many churches have relied on a kind of prosperity theology in their rapid growth. There was a lot of teaching on practical issues of family and work. With the pressure increasing on churches and individual Christians, it may be a time where God is purifying the church. When there is external pressure and individual believers suffer, it makes them more aware of God in their lives. There is a realization that accumulating wealth or career success does not ultimately answer the deeper questions about purpose in life. The increased pressure may result in a better witness to those around them.

Previously, they felt it was easy to share their faith. There was a general openness and acceptance, and it was

easy to publicly declare yourself to be a Christian. That has changed. In the current environment, people are often afraid to listen to a message that may cause them problems. They know of believers who were not able to work in government departments or state-owned enterprises because of their religious beliefs.

I asked about what helps them grow and sustain their relationship with the Lord. Aaron mentioned that their church is more limited in what help they can provide since the church has been split up into many small groups and is under constant pressure from the government. They continue to host a small group in their home with several families. He finds that his own Bible reading and prayer is what helps him the most.

We talked about praying. Jennie said she prays for the government leaders every day. Regardless of how she feels about what is happening, she prays that God's will and ways for their leaders and country will be done. She knows that the hearts of the leaders are in God's hands, and this is the basis of her trust and prayers.

As we finished our chat, I asked what they hope that Christians outside of China would pray for in remembering China. Aaron and Jennie mentioned three things. First, they asked for prayer for pastors. Church leaders come under intense pressure, so they ask for strength, wisdom, perseverance, and protection in the midst of increasing pressure and persecution. They gave examples of pastors being on a blacklist for travel and having unannounced intrusions into their homes. Second, they asked prayer for a revival. Jennie mentioned reading about historical events in the US and UK when revivals have broken out on a large scale and impacted the church and country for decades afterwards. She lamented that such a large country like China, with so many people who have never heard about Jesus, has yet to see such a revival. She prays and hopes to see a China revival. Thirdly, Aaron asked for prayer for Christians in the marketplace. They need teaching and role models to live out their faith. He feels this is an area where ethnic Chinese Christians can make a particular impact.

Finishing our tea and chat was a quiet, sober experience. I could see Aaron and Jennie's trust in God made them confident even as they expressed deep concerns for their children, their church, and their country. They trust God will use what happens in China in the coming years even as they anticipate continued and even increased challenges. My hope is that those of us outside of China will pray for Chinese brothers and sisters, that when they have done everything, they would stand firm.[5]

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[1] These are not their real names. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect their privacy. This conversation took place in November 2022 during the height of the zero-COVID lockdowns around China.

[2] The song title: 耶穌愛你， "Jesus Loves You by Stream" of Praise Music Ministries. You can listen to the song in Chinese with English subtitles at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSjjpGHiozM.

[3] During China's one-child policy (1980–2015) (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One-child_policy for more details), families were restricted to having a single child. In 2016 China allowed families to have two children. In 2021 this was further relaxed to allowing three or more children. Unfortunately, China's birth rate has continued to drop with 2022 being the lowest since 1949. See Andrew Mullen, "China Population: 7 Takeaways from 2022 Figures," *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2023, accessed February 6, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/economy/economic-indicators/article/3207109/china-population-7-takeaways-2022-figures.

[4] This is one of many Chinese proverbs: "王小二过年，一年不如一年"； its meaning is that each year is getting worse and worse.

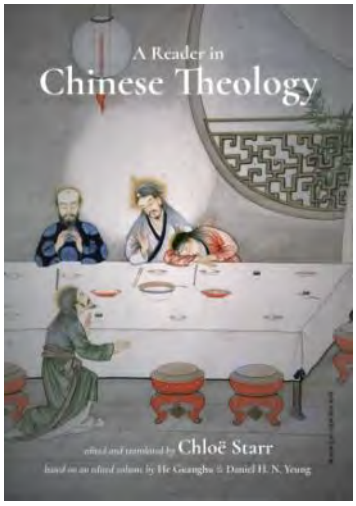
[5] See Ephesians 6:12-–17.

Over the last 30 years, Peter Bryant (pseudonym) has had the chance to visit, to live for extended periods of time, and to travel to almost all of China's provinces. As a Christian business person, he has met Chinese from all walks of life. He has a particular interest in marketplace ministries and business as mission and enjoys working with emerging Chinese leaders.

Book Review

Chinese Theology for English-Language Readers

Reviewed by Jacob Chengwei Feng



A Reader in Chinese Theology edited by Chloë Starr. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022, 524 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1481312103, ISBN 10: 1481312103, paperback. Available from Baylor University Press and Amazon.

Edited and translated by Chloë Starr, Professor of Asian Christianity and Theology at Yale Divinity School, *A Reader in Chinese Theology* is the best reader in Chinese theology available in English and is based on the first volume of *Sino-Christian Theology Reader*, edited by He Guanghu and Daniel H. N. Yeung that covers mainland China. He, Yeung, and Liu Xiaofeng were instrumental in coining the term *Sino-Christian theology* and have used it to promote the academic study of Christianity in China. Starr prefers *Chinese theology* over *Sino-Christian theology* due to the "more expansive and inclusive" (p. xiv) nature of the former and the controversial nature of the latter (p. xiii-xiv). Starr's previous book, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context*, reflects her consistent choice of terminology.

The 35 chapters were chosen from the 45 essays of its Chinese version,[1] which echoes He's broader definition of *Sino-Christian theology*, namely, "ecumenical Christian faith and messages expressed in the Chinese language" (Chinese version, p. 9). Starr reorganizes the 35 authors into three categories: 1) traditional China, from Jingjing (or Adam) of the eighth century to Hong Xiuquan of the nineteenth century; 2) revolutionary and nationalist China of the early twentieth century, including Ma Xiangbo, Jia Yuming, Zhao Zichen, Wang Mingdao, Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee), Xu Zongze, Wu Leichuan, Wu Yaozong, Wu Jingxiong, Luo Zhenfang, Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting), Chen Zemin, and Wang Weifan; and 3) contemporary theologians and academics, including Chen Cunfu, Gao Shining, Zhang Qingxiong, Liang Gong, Yang Huilin, Zhao Lin, Zhuo Xinping, Liu Xiaofeng, Li Qiuling, Li Tiangang, Sun Shangyang, Cao Shengjie, Gao Ying, and He Guanghu.

Starr excludes certain authors included in the Chinese version, such as Michele Ruggieri, the brief summary of Eastern Orthodox ordinance, You Xilin, Zhang Qingxiong, Wang, Xiaochao, and others, and adds Ma Xiangbo, Xu Zongze from part II. Her goal is to offer "a slightly different balance of texts, with fewer essays by contemporary academic scholars and an increase—albeit marginal—in the representation of women theologians and Roman Catholic thinkers" (p. xv). As an editor, she has to weigh different factors in choosing what authors will present the best "snapshot" of Chinese theology to English-speaking readers as comprehensively as possible.

This volume offers a multi-dimensional overview of the theological treatises written in Chinese. It traverses approximately 1400 years of history from the seventh century, when the Church of the East sent missionaries to China, to the present time. All four periods of theological flourishing are represented: 1) the eighth century, when Jingjiao (or Nestorian Christianity, the Luminous Religion) flourished during the Tang dynasty; 2) the 1620s and 1630s, when the Jesuits sent their missionaries during the Ming dynasty; 3) the 1920s and 1930s (Republican era), when the indigenous Christian movement began to take shape in China; 4) and the 1990s and 2000s, after China began its economic open-door policy. Starr is correct in observing that "theology thrives in peacetime, in eras of church growth and educational provision, and often only when foreign missionaries withdraw from active leadership" (p. xi). Authors include Syriac (Jingjing), Italian (Matteo Ricci), and Chinese. It features major branches of world Christianity—the Church of the East (chapter 1), the Catholic Church (chapters 2-6, 9, 14, 17), Protestants (chapter 7), the Little Flock (or the Christian Assembly, the local churches, chapter 13), and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches (chapters 16, 18-22, 33). The authors come from all walks of life: Christian monk (chapter 1), Catholic priest (chapters 2, 14), statesman and scholar

(chapters 3-5, 9, 16, 19), pastor (chapters 7, 12), revolutionary (chapter 8), theologian and educator (chapters 10, 11, 15, 18, 20, 21, 33, 34), church leader and teacher (chapter 13), jurist (chapter 17), professor (chapters 22, 24-31, 35), and researcher (chapter 23).

In her introduction, Starr reviews the selected authors in chronological order. Importantly, she highlights the contextual nature of Chinese theology, like all theology (p. ix). She summarizes common theological concerns found in each era. For example, late Ming scholar-officials debated the nature of the soul as they engaged in cross-cultural metaphysics and questioned Roman Catholic ethical strictures, such as why a man had to dismiss his concubines before he could be baptized. Starr distinguishes between the historical-social context and the textual context of any particular theological writing. Again, this is consistent with the central thesis in her *Chinese Theology: Text and Context*, in which she argues that the literary form of theology is itself a way of contextualization, and that the text is the defining aspect of Chinese theology. Anticipating the question of selectivity, Starr explains that the volume includes "a rich selection of writings that together give insight into the breadth of Chinese theology over the centuries, and to the central questions that animate it" (p. x).

For Starr, Chinese theology bears a two-fold responsibility. First, it "addresses the topics discussed by systematic theology everywhere." Second, it "addresses topics of more particular interest, such as the nature of the human through contrast with Confucian ethics or Daoist understanding of being and action, or the kingdom of God in light of Marxist economic theories" (p. x). One may ask if Starr's distinction between "systematic theology everywhere" and comparative theology is needed, as theologians in the West and East are increasingly aware of the need for systematic theology to engage in interfaith dialogue in a pluralistic world.

Another area this book (and the original Chinese version) has missed is theology and science dialogue; Xie Honglai (1873–1916) could serve as an excellent example. His booklet had a positive impact on Wang Mingdao. For Sino-Christian theology particularly, and Chinese theology generally, the need is urgent for theologians and academics to engage with the sciences. China has progressed rapidly in these areas, and Christian faith has been undermined by scientism prevalent in Chinese society since the May Fourth movement.

In order to help English readers familiarize themselves with the context and background of the authors, Starr provides biographies or introductions, especially for the authors of the first two categories. Some of these authors are among the most well-known in the English-speaking academic world, such as Matteo Ricci, Xu Guangqi, Wang Mingdao, and Watchman Nee. In contrast, many, if not most, of those in the third category are least known; they deserve more space than a simple footnote. However, since many of these scholars are still alive, the editor might consider it unsuitable to provide scholarly biographies or introductions.

Even with these caveats, I highly recommend this book to laypeople and students. Readers will gain firsthand experience by diving into primary sources in diverse literary forms of Chinese theology.

Our thanks to Baylor University Press for providing a copy of A Reader in Chinese Theology *edited by Chloë Starr for this review.*

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[1] Han Xu Shen Xue Du Ben 漢語神學讀本 [Sino-Christian Theology Reader], 2 vols. Edited by He Guanghu [何光滬] and Daniel H. N. Yeung [楊熙楠]. Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press [道風書社], 2009 at 漢語神學讀本 (豆瓣) (douban.com).

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ChinaSource Perspective

Praying for Church Leaders in China

By Trent Hayes

Image credit: Tatum Bergen via UnSplash.

ChinaSource encourages readers to connect with believers in China through prayer. A long-time ChinaSource volunteer invites us to lift up in prayer church leaders who are often under tremendous pressure.

The privilege of intercessory prayer is one of the greatest blessings that we have as believers. I wholeheartedly agree with Shuya Kim concerning the importance of the ministry of presence for expatriates seeking to serve China, but the reality for most of us is that we will not be able to live in China at this time. Yet, through the privilege of intercessory prayer, I believe that we can continue to journey with church leaders in China.

The ministry challenges that Chinese pastors face are discussed in depth in the articles of this issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly (CSQ)*, so I will focus on praying for their personal walk with the Lord. I often allow Paul's prayers for the church to guide me, praying particularly that they "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord" (Colossians 1:10; see similar terminology in Ephesians. 4:1; Philippians 1:27 and I Thessalonians 2:12). Interestingly, all the churches for whom Paul prays this prayer were facing persecution or theological challenge. Thus, I feel that it is appropriate to let Paul's prayers guide ours as we pray for Chinese church leaders.

First, let us not forget that they face the same challenges as pastors in other places. Here are some examples from the small sample of pastors whom I know: a wife battling cancer; a child facing potential blindness; a child who is not walking with the Lord; and, unfortunately, numerous instances of painful conflicts among co-workers in the church. Let us pray that as they face these challenges, that they will not waver in their faith, but rather demonstrate "endurance and patience with joy" (Colossians 1:11).

Second, we should be aware of challenges that are unique to the current Chinese setting. Other articles in this *CSQ* will help you understand many of the issues, so let me emphasize just two. To me perhaps the most important is that the pastors truly have their identity firmly rooted in a clear understanding of the gospel and an increasing knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10). Chinese society in general does not understand the role of a pastor. At best, people associate it with the role of monks or martial arts experts, people who have relatively little impact on society. There is often very little respect for these roles. In a society where there is so much emphasis how one contributes to society, facing this lack of understanding and respect can be hard. We need to pray they remember that they are important and precious in God's sight.

A second major issue concerns family challenges. Although the one-child policy has been discarded, its impact often makes adjusting to marriage harder. In addition, many pastors and their spouses came to faith after they were married and may have bad habits that need to be unlearned. Caring for elderly parents is even more challenging when there are no siblings to share the load. Their children's future is another huge stress. When pastors face scrutiny by the government, this can impact the future choices available for their children. Some children embrace these challenges; others rebel.

Let us be faithful to journey with these precious servants of Jesus, praying that they walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Trent Hayes (pseudonym) has served in various professional capacities in China and Hong Kong for many years and is a long-time volunteer with ChinaSource.

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