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Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan
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Introduction

CHRISTIANITY FEVER?

In 1949 there were about one million Chinese Protestants, who worshipped in some twenty thousand churches and chapels, and in countless home meetings. By 1958, after nine years of communist rule, almost all churches had been closed. Strict controls were also in force against Christian meetings held in homes. In August 1966 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued a directive which marked the start of the Cultural Revolution. A campaign was launched against old ideas, culture, customs and habits. Historic buildings, libraries, and works of art were wrecked and thousands of individuals persecuted. Religious institutions were closed, often with violence against personnel and vandalism of contents. For the next decade it seemed that religions, including Christianity, disappeared from China. Their total destruction was an ideal promoted by Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and a leading figure in the Cultural Revolution, who confidently announced that religion was dead. This suppression of institutional religion has few parallels in history, perhaps only the governments of Albania and North Korea having been equally thorough.¹ In some areas the persecution was particularly systematic: for example the county of Pingyang in Zhejiang province was targeted as a 'model atheist district' in which all religion was to be eliminated.

¹ As noted by Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991, p. 11. Two churches were permitted to remain open in Beijing to serve the diplomatic community. See Donald E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China: A Documentary History*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972, pp. 287–8, for the start of the Cultural Revolution.

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Christians continued to meet in secret during this period. Evangelical groups in Hong Kong reported that small prayer meetings were being held in private homes, that by 1974 several hundred people were attending large services in Fuzhou, and that in Wenzhou there were Bible study classes and training sessions. We have also seen mimeographed Bibles and religious literature from the mid-1970s. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution there was widespread unofficial activity in the Christian community, and also the first signs of a revival of the official church: K. H. Ting, Bishop of Nanjing, was allowed to meet foreign visitors after 1973.²

In 1976 Mao Zedong died, the Gang of Four was overthrown and Chinese society started to recover from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping took effective control of government. The Party explicitly repudiated the policies of the past decade, promised greater freedoms and initiated a wide-ranging reform programme. No-one could foresee what the future of religion might be. One could assume that there were far fewer than one million Protestant believers by 1979, after the persecutions, closure of the official church, ideological remoulding of society and lack of contact with the outside world. No new pastors had been ordained since the 1950s, most church buildings were being used for other purposes, there were hardly any Christian publications, no news of religion in the media, no religious education in schools. Would people still have any wish to engage in religious activities? According to Leninist theory, religion will rapidly die out in socialist society, while even less extreme theories of secularization predict its decline in the face of industrialization, urbanization and improved education. And if Christianity were merely a tool of imperialism, as the Chinese people had been told for many years, it would have been in a precarious position by 1978, since foreign influence had been absent for three decades and was still carefully restricted.

In fact, the 1980s saw a rapid growth of Protestant Christianity, which spread markedly faster than other religions. The first

² See Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 9–26 for further information. The *hanyu pinyin* romanization of K. H. Ting, used by some writers, is Ding Guangxun.

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church to re-open was in the eastern port of Ningbo in early April 1979, and it was soon followed by more in Shanghai and other large cities. The official church recovered much of its property and revived as an institution. According to its estimates, by 1990 there were some six thousand open churches and fifteen thousand registered meeting points providing for five million believers. It ran seminaries, a publication programme, education for lay leaders, an aid agency, youth groups and many of the other facilities that one might expect of a church. Moreover its legal status was recognized by the government and Christian leaders were able to make representations at the highest political levels.

Meanwhile there had also been a growth of religious activities conducted in homes and other meeting points. Many Christians do not attend the open churches and have organized their own structures. These groups are diverse: some are opposed to the official church for ideological or personal reasons, some are linked to networks in different parts of China, some have contacts with foreigners, others are simple, humble meetings of uneducated people who may understand very little of Christianity. This phenomenon is generally known outside China as the 'house church movement'.³ We suggest later that this term is becoming inadequate, since many of the house churches have expanded into communities of considerable size and complexity.

The house churches are politically controversial. In the early 1950s, the Chinese government established a sophisticated network of administrative agencies to control religious activities. The system fell into disuse during the Cultural Revolution but was reinstated in 1979. House churches are a challenge to this bureaucratic supervision, since they meet in private and do not recognize the leadership of the official church or government bodies. Also, some have found enthusiastic assistance abroad, which contravenes the government's insistence on no foreign

³ The term 'house church' (*jiating jiaohui*) may have originated from the movement founded by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng) in the 1930s, which promoted meetings in private homes led by lay persons. In China, the term 'meeting point' (*juhuidian*) is also commonly used.

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interference in China's religious affairs. Among the house churches' most vocal supporters have been evangelical groups in Hong Kong, who have encouraged them by importing publications, transmitting radio broadcasts, training evangelists and donating money. Moreover they have published material that is embarrassing to the official church leadership.

It has been claimed that the house church movement has grown in an extraordinary fashion, that there are fifty or even one hundred million underground Christians in China. Such claims are wildly exaggerated, but there has been a dramatic increase in religious activities, especially of Protestantism and of folk religion, since 1979. By 1989 this was acknowledged by Chinese research institutions, and began to acquire the name 'Christianity fever', which has since been used in official Chinese publications.

Religion gained a higher political profile after 1989. The top leadership of the CCP, dismayed by the challenge to its power in spring of that year, attempted to intensify its ideological control over society. It was aware that religious organizations, especially Christian ones, had been influential in opposition to the communist governments of eastern Europe. Stricter regulations were promulgated, and rumours spread that a crackdown on religious activities was imminent. In 1990, Chinese government officials reportedly feared that 70 per cent of the nation's religious activities were out of control, while Premier Li Peng called for attacks on the underground churches. Other senior leaders warned of a transfer of allegiance, especially in the countryside, from the CCP to religious organizations.⁴

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE CHRISTIANITY

The reports of 'Christianity fever' raise many questions. In the short term, how reliable are the reports? What are the true numbers? Will the church become a force in Chinese politics? On a deeper level, the phenomenon raises important questions about Chinese society and religion, and about the nature of

⁴ *China News and Church Report* (CNCR) 1805, 28 June 1991; *International Herald Tribune*, 1 July 1991, p. 6.

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Christianity, or at least its Protestant tradition. Is the growth comparable to that in South Korea or Latin America? Are Chinese people transferring allegiance from their traditional religions to a western import? Can we identify explanations for these changes in the context of economic reform, industrialization and increased contact with the outside world?

Two themes to be developed in this book are the historical and political conditions that have contributed to the current state of the Protestant community in China. The Protestant missionary enterprise coincided with a period when traditional Chinese culture was in crisis, Chinese governments were ineffective, the country often in a state of war, and when foreign power was at its height. The missionaries met strong opposition to their work: they and their Chinese converts were generally despised and rejected by the population. Many Chinese officials also opposed Christianity as a foreign religion, and later the Guomindang (GMD) and the CCP attacked it, sometimes violently, as a tool of imperialism.⁵ The foreign connection has diminished dramatically, but Christians are to some extent still protected by foreign support: the CCP would face severe international pressure if it were to adopt outright repressive measures. Besides, the government since 1979 has been relatively tolerant of religion, and the church itself is now probably strong enough to withstand any administrative pressures that might be applied. At the worst, more Christians would be obliged to practise in secret, and that could easily backfire on the government. Thus politically and historically, Christians form a minority social group that has suffered repeatedly from persecution but has finally achieved a measure of security.

We will briefly anticipate some sociological explanations for the recent spread of Christianity. The 1980s was a period of radical transition in the countryside, seeing the rebirth of family farming and a market economy, and at the same time a liberalization of political controls. The economic changes brought greater prosperity to many, but also more uncertainty.

⁵ Guomindang (or Kuomintang) is the name of the nationalist party, founded by Sun Yat-sen and led for many years by Chiang Kai-shek, that ruled China from 1926 to 1949.

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Traditional rural isolation was increasingly broken as people travelled and traded far more, and there was greater contact with the outside world. There was perhaps a sense of loss of identity. Meanwhile health provision continued to be very poor, and women in particular may not have benefited from the reforms: some observers suggest their status deteriorated over the decade. At the same time there was far less rigid social control after the abolition of the People's Communes in 1979/80 and less pressure to display political conformity. In short, most families had more cash, more freedom to participate in religious activities, and also perhaps more anxieties which they needed to assuage.

In cities, disaffection with the CCP was widespread by the late 1980s among intellectuals, a number of whom developed an interest in Christian thought and traditions. There were reports of some conversions among Chinese students abroad and even on the campuses of universities in Beijing. This interest, however, seemed to remain rather superficial and limited. Christianity in China has yet to evolve an intellectual dimension equivalent to its spiritual life. Neither has it made much impact on industrial workers, although one source of converts has been retired people seeking relief from loneliness or ill-health. With some exceptions the growth rate is probably slower than in the countryside. The core of many congregations is still elderly people who were practising Christians before 1949.

Christian life in China often revolves around two poles: church, or meeting point, and home. There are over twenty thousand registered church buildings at which communal worship takes place, often close in liturgy to European or North American models. Most such churches are served by pastors affiliated to the official church organization, the China Christian Council (CCC). Many churches have activities such as Bible-study classes and prayer groups.

Many believers find weekly attendance at church insufficient for their spiritual needs, and so home activities of various kinds are important. Retired people, usually female, are often among the most fervent disciples. At their home meetings, prayer and personal testimony play an important role, especially accounts

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of healing. Many believers interpret their lives as a series of minor epiphanies or miracles. Belief in ghosts and devils is still widespread, and prayer in the name of Jesus thought to be an effective remedy against possession and evil spirits. These informal home meetings are an effective opportunity to conduct personal evangelism among neighbours, for example by convincing them of the powers of Jesus. Supernatural healing, protection and vengeance have been a deep-rooted element of traditional Chinese religiosity for several thousand years. Moreover, the political climate positively favours informal oral communication: many subjects are officially taboo and the information network is tightly controlled. Serious obstacles are put in the way of anyone who wishes to conduct research on religion, so it is usually difficult to verify or disprove particular stories. It is easy for tales of the supernatural to flourish.

In Chinese folk religion, prayer is essentially petitionary, seeking health and wealth in particular. This is reflected in the Chinese Christian tradition. We were frequently told that a main reason for conversion is hearing of or experiencing healing by Jesus, which appears to be a common phenomenon in China today. Other testimonies relate to the achievement of wealth, safety at times of accidents and God's revenge on enemies, all popular themes in traditional Chinese religion. But these concerns were often a first step towards a deeper understanding of the religion, and believers would later turn to Jesus as personal friend and protector, source of eternal life, Son of God and saviour of mankind: the Christological emphasis is on the role of Jesus as Saviour and Healer. Among many groups the sense of sinfulness and the need for repentance is strong, and they may insist on the need for a rebirth experience, sometimes to be witnessed by glossolalia or other psychic phenomena. Behavioural changes, for example being less quarrelsome, are seen as a reliable indicator of sincerity and piety.

The lack of trained leadership for the huge numbers of believers in rural areas is apparent. Heterodoxy can easily arise as peasants integrate the new religion without a strong church tradition. In some places folk beliefs are suppressed by the local government while Christianity is tolerated, which makes it an

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attractive alternative. Protestant/folk religion syncretism has produced self-appointed Messiahs, eschatological predictions, mass spiritual healing and so on.⁶ Some Christian groups, on the contrary, are extremely strict and tolerate no accommodation with what they perceive as heterodoxy.

As regards ethics, Christianity is known in some areas as the religion which can ensure harmony in the family, especially in the relation between mother- and daughter-in-law, which is notorious in Chinese culture as a breeding-ground for family arguments. Christians also claim a disproportionately high number of 'model workers' and low number of criminals in their midst. Even Li Liuwan, one of the six Vice-Presidents of the PRC, praised the positive moral influence of Christianity during a visit to Wenzhou in 1991. However the collation of crime statistics as well as religious ones is problematic in China, and we are not certain to what extent these claims are justifiable. Rubinstein concludes his recent study of the church in Taiwan with the words:

What the history of Taiwanese Protestantism teaches is that Chinese society has once again demonstrated a unique ability to force alien traditions to transform themselves into patterns with which the Chinese people are most comfortable. Such a process of Sinification was at work in the centuries when Buddhism first entered China and slowly, but surely, became a Chinese religion. It is clear that this process, this steady societal pressure for change and accommodation, is at work again.⁷

Is this true in the People's Republic also? The encounter between two vast traditions, Christianity and Chinese culture, has fascinated and puzzled members of both for hundreds of years.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

A study such as this inevitably raises questions of methodology. The size and diversity of China constitute the first difficulty to be

⁶ See for example Lu Guangwen, 'We Must Guard Against Heterodox Sects', *China Study Journal*, vol. 6 no. 2, August 1991, pp. 72–3. Chinese popular religion is discussed below in chapter 4.

⁷ Murray A. Rubinstein, *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan: Mission, Seminary and Church*, Armonk, New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1991, p. 155.

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confronted. The Han Chinese inhabit a vast land mass, almost ten million square kilometres of contrasting terrain: mountains, deserts, alluvial plains and coasts, some parts poor and arid, others rich and fertile. Economic activity ranges from space technology to subsistence farming and hunting. Apart from the Han, other ethnic and linguistic groups in China include speakers of Turkish, Mongolian and Tungus languages who migrated from Central Asia; speakers of Sino-Tibetan languages in the far west; and numerous small groups in south-west China who speak Austro-Asiatic languages.

In the west, national boundaries have accustomed us to think of specific local cultural identities. We are likely to see the differences rather than the similarities between a Swede and a Spaniard for example. The absence of these boundaries in China may tend to conceal the ethnological diversity of the Chinese population, although each Chinese province has the population and area of a medium-sized European country. The use of a common script may also conceal real linguistic differences, and the formal national culture masks a tremendous variety of local cultures. There has so far been little ethnographic charting of the population, and it is often difficult to appreciate the significant differences that may exist between one province and another, even one district and another. Economic and social diversity is equally pronounced. Some districts have seen rapid industrialization in the past twenty years; there may be areas only fifty miles away where the modern world has barely impinged.

To speak of 'Christianity in China' is only useful at a high level of abstraction, as when talking of 'Christianity in Europe'. There is no 'typical' city or province. Religion in Shanghai means something very different from religion in Lanzhou; Zhejiang is not the same as Qinghai. A striking example is the relative lack of success of evangelization in Guangdong despite more than a century of intensive efforts and easy access. One should be careful when generalizing from case studies. The research agenda at present should include detailed local investigations that could eventually provide data for broader conclusions. Religion in modern China has been a relatively

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under-researched topic, and so writers have to operate on a high level of generality, which is a serious weakness. It also reflects a weakness of social science research on China in general. In the modern era there is no readily available set of provincial or district level surveys to which one can refer for accurate data with regard to religion. For example, if one wished to collate information on a particular province's religious heritage and current situation, and their correlations with local politics, industrial development, central government policy or health programmes, there is no ready-made solution: one would be obliged to piece together the information for each area in a painstaking and lengthy process.

The reason is not hard to find. On the western side, scholarship on modern China has been influenced by the agenda of governments, particularly that of the USA, which viewed China as an ideological and possibly military threat. Research was to a considerable extent focused on economic and political rather than cultural questions. Moreover China was isolated internationally and access to it extremely difficult. In the 1980s progress was made in social science and arts research on China, but funding is difficult to obtain and much remains to be done. East–West relations have eased markedly since the 1970s, however, and the outlook for future study seems good.

Chinese sources need to be evaluated with care. Official publications reflect two important traditions of the CCP, which came to power after a thirty-year armed struggle. First, its political culture was strongly influenced by the demands of guerrilla warfare. The emphasis was on the strict control of intelligence in a military environment, rather than on a public information network for civilian administration. After 1949 the Chinese leadership constantly feared that it might be involved in a major war with the USA, which it confronted in Korea and Vietnam, the USSR or Taiwan. To secure political authority it placed rigid limits on the flow of information. Consequently many fields of study – local history, economics, social developments, political trends – were accessible only to those with a right to know, which was determined by status in the Party.

Second, publications in China are supposed to conform to