

A Disparate Sinomania: Understanding China's Policy on Religion



© Otto Lui
Associate General Secretary (Training)

I believe that not many will object to me calling this recent trend in Hong Kong churches in “a passion for China”. Of course I know that this trend is motivated less by passion or a fierce desire for evangelism; but more as a response to the persecution that the churches in the mainland now face.

In recent months, there have been mentions of dismantling crosses and churches in China, all manners of forces employed to forbid congregations gathering, severe scrutiny of student believers, forced signing of renunciations of faith, forbidding of Sunday school and Christian publications, forced installation of monitoring cameras within churches, controlled elections of church staff--the list goes on, and it is happening on a scale that is unprecedented in the last forty years. If one claims that these are merely isolated cases and regional occurrences, something happening over more than half of China just could not be a small thing! In recent years, some members of the official TSPM church have left and started unregistered churches on their own. Nowadays, the space for an open “family church” like this has become very narrow; they have been forced to become true “underground churches” as well.

Recently, there have been many articles and lectures that are about the unfavorable situation facing the Christian churches in the mainland. Understanding this information is vital, but we need to learn to interpret the situation before coming to any conclusions. In this way we can then explore the possibilities for the future. As such, there are certain prerequisites necessary for understanding, and so I will begin the discussion from the development of the religious policy.

I. Understanding China's Religious Policy

Many seminars have been held regarding China's religious policy which tried to understand the predicament facing the churches in China, and its possible future development, from the angle of the formation and execution of the Regulations.

1. A Basic Understanding

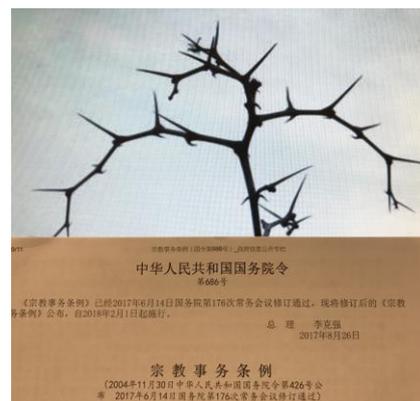
First, we must understand that the basic stance the Chinese government has towards religion has more or less remained the same throughout the years, even if there had been occasional adjustments. Discussions about China's religious policies have often started from Article 36 of the Constitution¹. The main points are as below:

a) The “freedom of religious belief” that citizens possess is an internal one, which is not “freedom of religious activity”. What you believe in your heart is not the issue, it is your religious behavior that may come under restraint.

b) What are the restraints? It means that no one can be “compelled” to believe or to not believe. The act of spreading the gospel can be interpreted as “compelling” others, and places of gathering, use of media, publishing and selling religious items, etc. all come under regulation?

c) The State has a responsibility to protect “normal” religious activities. What constitutes “normal” religious activities, however, depends on who is interpreting it.

d) Religious affairs are not subject to foreign domination. Thus any connection to foreign churches or organizations can be interpreted as domination by foreign powers.



Therefore, from an official point of view, the restrictions and regulations adopted against Uighurs (Muslims) and Tibetans (Tibetan Buddhism) are out of political and national security concerns, not an issue regarding religious freedom.

2. The Policies Reflect the Times

Moreover, the implementation of the Religious Regulations had always varied across different situations in different times. For example, “Document 19”² released in 1982 had the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up of China as its background. It carried a heavy vibe of friendliness to collaborate, which saw that religions existed in an ecosystem where they naturally “flourished and perished”, and therefore did not need to be dealt with in too strong a manner. In 1991, “Document 6”³ was released, and we can see that the document was released after the June 4th incident in 1989. It emphasized countering “foreign influence”, and hence the need to minimize different aspects of freedom. From the turn of the Millennium, with China joining the World Trade Organization, and with a high-flying economy, it became apparent that religion was seen as a positive tool for constructing society.

In 2013, the Chinese military released “Silent Contest”, an anti-American propaganda film with ideological warfare as its dominant theme. The film mentioned that the US used

non-government organizations and Christianity to spread Western values in attempt to overthrow the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.⁴ The measures deployed against foreign non-government organizations and Christian churches are an extension of this thinking. With President Xi Jinping discovering that there was a serious situation with Communist party members believing in Christianity, and Christian ministry flourishing in all sectors of the country, the tightening and heightening of regulations against Christianity was just a matter of time.⁵

3. The Problem of Execution

On the other hand, though the government often talks about the “rule of law”, this is a long process of change. In a society governed by people, the execution of law is more influential than its legislation. 2018 saw the implementation of the “Revised Regulation on Religious Affairs”. Though the text of the law as it is written is important, what matters more is its interpretation and execution. The “Revised Regulation on Religious Affairs” was passed by the State Council, not by the National People’s Congress, which means it is an administrative executive order, and each province will need to draft and approve its own “Regulation on Implementation”. This means that the original text will be defined, interpreted and executed based on the unique characteristics of each region.

The first Regulation on Religious Affairs was first implemented in 2005.⁶ Each province had to revise its own version of “Regulation for Implementation”. Yunnan province did not complete its version until 2016! Thus, the greatest difference in 2018 was the rapid speed at which each region’s own “Regulation for Implementation” had been proposed and implemented. If one were to read each particular “Regulation for Implementation” one would find huge discrepancies in actual execution; in some regions it is very strict, in others more relaxed.

In March 2018, the “Reform Proposal for Deepening Party and National Institutional Relations”⁷ was released. The document proposes the direct control of the party over news media, movies, and the Ethnic Minority and Religious Affairs Department, which heavily emphasizes ideology over all other concerns. Even departments currently responsible for handling religious affairs (State Administration for Religious Affairs) could be shut down at any moment. The existence of the church is only accommodated by the state with an eye towards stable national development. In China, state affairs and church affairs can never be interpreted separately.

II. Understanding the journey of the Chinese Church

How many mainland Chinese are Christians? What is the ratio of three-self churches to family churches? These questions have never had empirical answers because such a census would be immensely difficult to chart, and indeed if accomplished, could only trigger tighter control from the Chinese government.⁸ When we reflect on the journey of the Chinese church, we can find traces of God’s guidance that gave it its pulse.

1. Working from the ground up

Christianity made its first three introductions into China during the Tang, Yuan, and Ming dynasties respectively. These missions focused on emperors and nobles, assuming the trickle-down strategy. However, emperors passed away and empires fell, uprooting the

noble influence along with them. By the fourth try some 200 years ago, missionary Robert Morrison had switched strategies to focus on the masses and work from the ground up. His new strategy created a sensation for the gospel. Christianity flourished in parishes and created resounding success for the next two centuries.

Even in the enforced absence of religious activities on the surface during the harsh years of the Cultural Revolution, the gospel continued to spread over hills and valleys. Christianity never came close to being “wiped out.” In rent years, Chinese churches have even taken advantage of the “Belt and Road” socioeconomic initiative to further their cross-cultural evangelism ministry.

Shifts in political winds never affected the survival of the Chinese church precisely because the latter was founded independently of its government. Traversing innumerable political changes, the Chinese Christian community have only come to grow exponentially. We have reason to believe that the capacity of the Chinese church to thrive under hardships is indeed leagues beyond our imagination.

2. Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, incorporated with Chinese cultural moralism, is the mainstream theology in Chinese churches. Moral behavior, the locals believe, is the testimony to the divide between the spiritual and the secular. They also believe the sole mission of a Christian’s life on earth is to spread the gospel. Thoughts like “All problems stem from the spiritual, and therefore will only be solved through prayers” used to be part of the mainstream as well. It is not difficult to see why when political activities encroached on the Chinese Church in 1949, locals further recused themselves from worldly affairs.

Incidentally, the effects of fundamentalism provided endurance to the Chinese church against external pressure and plight. Recently, a Henan church leader had given a comment after the cross of her church being demolished, said, “God is using gentiles (the government) to redirect our focus on his word. In the past, we have been too distracted building external structures to realize we need to prioritize inner our spiritual health.” Believers overseas might frown on the locals’ seclusion and perhaps their unwillingness to voice out against unrighteous acts. To the locals however, keeping to themselves is the reason they have survived decades of political storms with their faith intact.

3. Diversification

As Chinese churches diversify, the line between three-self and house churches blurs. Nor are emerging new congregations able to fit into just these two categories. The recent suppression has come down on both registered churches and unregistered house churches that, until forcibly shut, had rented out houses, malls, and hotels for their congregation. Traditional house churches are also being replaced and even three-self churches have had their crosses demolished in public.

Under the suppression, Christians have found other ways to express their faith. Among the most creative are artists who do so through their graphic design, street art, and collectibles. When the government clamped down on foreign investments recently, local Christian businessmen demonstrated versatility by turning their workplace into a place of testimony. Now a new wave of Christian leadership emerges. These are individuals born after the cultural revolution and groomed by major city churches. Aided by their broadened

horizons, global connections, access to knowledge, and the absence of traditional burdens, these new leaders are able to expand development and diversify ministries.

III. Understanding the evolving Chinese ministry

Hong Kong and foreign churches have participated in many different types of missions in mainland China. Some have sustained development by keeping a low profile, and so their operations are little known to other Christians. Ministries tend to serve different roles in China depending on the timing and opportunity. In the 80s, ministries expanded their roles in handing out Bibles, reopening churches, and building infrastructure. The 90s saw a surge in pastoral training and legal parish publications. In the last decade or so, Chinese church staff has gone to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, North America, and even Taiwan for their theological education. According to a local staff, the influx of theology post-graduates has already resolved the lack of theological training in mainland China. As the environment continues to change, we have reason to believe a new direction for ministries will emerge from the current political situation.

Contrary to the Hong Kong church's current ministry efforts in evangelism, preaching, bible study, and worship,⁹ our work in mainland China should focus on preparing local staff to carry on service responsibilities in lieu of foreign support.

Some ministries have not been affected today. These include gospel radio, theological education, workplace ministry, and leadership training. While we will not dive into details, let us look at what they share in common:

1. Keeping a low profile: Ministry work is not publicized.
2. Localizing: Defer and adhere to the local church leadership's directions in collaborations.
3. Flexibility: Freely adjusting the scope and methods to meet mission objectives.
4. Relations: Ministry staff has established trust founded upon years of partnership.



Perhaps owing to these factors, such organizations and staff involved in front-line work have made few public statements. In retrospect though, new opportunities have always, through God's grace, been presented to the Chinese in trying times. Nevertheless, looking at the current course of changes in the religious scene, many staff may start to think that their ministry work may soon come to an end.

IV. The Responses for Churches and Organizations in Hong Kong and Overseas

Looking at the current course of changes in the religious scene, some ministry practitioners may start to think that their ministry work may soon come to an end. Yet as believers and organisations outside of the Mainland, how are we to recognize clearly the challenge and respond effectively.

1. Focusing on The Greatest Challenge

Firstly, we have to understand that the greatest challenge of developing the church has never been the external environment or imposed restrictions. Rather, the “Sinicization” of church leadership proposed by the Chinese government is the greatest challenge. It is not difficult to face the demolition of crosses, installation of monitoring cameras, etc. In fact, as the external environment worsens, church workers become more united. However, “Sinicization” does not mean that Christianity becomes localized. Instead, it means “leading by socialist core values” in order to accommodate the current political education and Chinese culture.¹⁰ If this were only a political slogan, such proposals would not have any practical effect. Yet, if it is seriously implemented, then the consequences are severe beyond imagination.

If it is agreed upon that “Sinicization” is the greatest challenge church workers and ministries in mainland China face, then the focus must be changed accordingly. In Guangdong province, many of the Sunday school classes, fellowships, Bible studies and preaching ministries operated by people from Hong Kong, which are originally meant to be conducted by locals, can no longer be continued. That does not mean there will be no more ministries to be done. Rather, more emphasis should now be given to the spiritual health of mainland staff. To build with them a more solid Biblical foundation, to walk beside them as they face the challenges of the future. Grassroot believers may not be able to tell which values society speaks of correspond with the Bible and which go against it--so what is most urgently needed right now is Biblical teaching in small groups.

2. Focusing on the Major Role

Early missionaries to China conducted most of their most important work in the mainland. In the 1950s, the mainland closed off. Missionaries and mission agencies were expelled to Hong Kong. The churches, ministries and social services in Hong Kong grew rapidly when the resources meant to be dedicated to the mainland were instead put to use here. Prior to the handover in 1997, faced with unknowns of the future, a large number of organizations left Hong Kong. By the turn of the millennium, they had returned, most of them returned for the sake of reaching China. As the churches in China grew and matured, many of the Chinese evangelistic ministries and churches in Hong Kong became confused about their role and had to reorient themselves.

On the other hand, development of mainland churches in the last forty years of is closely related to the support from churches and organizations in Hong Kong and overseas. From material support in earlier periods, to support in publications and leadership training, and even with connecting with churches around the world, Hong Kong has played a pivotal role. Today, churches in the mainland still hold in high regard the Hong Kong “brand” Bible studies, theological education, ministry model research and other contributions. Hence, there needs to be more discussion into the proper use of this “brand” in facing the challenges of “Sinicization”.

In the last two decades, large numbers of Chinese have migrated to North America, Europe, Australia and other places. These immigrants have become a source for growth in Putonghua-speaking churches. Being overseas makes it easier for them to accept the gospel. Therefore, if it is not probable to enter China and serve as we have in the past, regions outside of China can become a big opportunity for ministry. Evangelism and discipleship for immigrants before they return to their home countries has always been a

sustainable approach in the history of the church, and a force towards diversity within church development.

3. A Kingdom Vision

In the grand scheme, all churches, be they overseas, in Hong Kong, or in mainland China, are part of God's kingdom and mission. We have to assess today's situation from a broad perspective. Under globalization, Hong Kong and foreign churches have greater access and interaction with Chinese churches than ever before, and so come to play a key role during these trying times. Even if Chinese churches are able to develop healthily again and require less contribution from Hong Kong, Hong Kong will have earned itself a valuable partner. On the other hand, the integration of these two lands also brings about the prospect that Hong Kong could come under the same scrutiny as China today.

But we shall focus on the will of God and not ourselves when we pursue this national vision. For two thousand years, the church has developed independently of the government. The Holy Spirit has moved the faithful to pioneer this new chapter in Christianity, despite being independent of government support. Today, among other repercussions, the "Belt and Road" initiative has opened a new channel for evangelists from Central Asia entering Europe. As foreign institutions inevitably leave the mainland, the time comes for the local Chinese church staff to take on more responsibilities. Similarly, Hong Kong and foreign churches can lean into innovative responses even as they halt certain operations under the current political situation.

4. The Vision as our Spiritual Test

The national vision is a test on our faith. It is a test to see how deeply we are affirmed on beliefs such as "God's promises", "God's command over history", or "God's righteousness and love". Ministers who have gone through trying times explain that the Chinese church thrives on the theology of the cross because they have been born and raised in suffering. Whereas a new generation of leadership is likened to the new generation of Israel born after the exodus into the wilderness; these leaders will prepare for future battles by experiencing the miracle of God as was done at the split of the Jordan River.

We cannot turn a blind eye to the brothers and sisters who have been robbed of their freedom, nor to the staff who have been treated unjustly. It is not enough to express only thoughts and prayers. It is time to pray to God to understand your position, and the new role you will play. God makes everything come together to work for the unity of the church, so that we will in our various roles collaborate on a single vision. That will be the spiritual test to testify to his work.

At the extreme, the government could tighten its control, censor the Bible and its interpretation, and extend these restrictions to Hong Kong. What then will become of your faith? When evangelists and martyrs appear as they had in the story of Daniel, where then will our convictions lie? How will pastors shepherd their flock and continue to spread the gospel? Will we despair upon closed doors when a new window of opportunity may be just around the corner? Such will be the test of our faith.



V. Conclusion

Those who have been involved in Chinese ministry will understand that no single statement can say what is right or wrong in the vastness that is China. Since there is such diversity, we will need a multifaceted and compassionate response to the Chinese church. We cannot afford to be ignorant, but let us embrace pluralism and unity with a pure heart.

Be not ignorant, for China is sophisticated. We will need much data and analyses to understand the situation in. We have to listen with a keen ear and pray to understand where to position ourselves with these people from such diverse backgrounds. We also have to embrace people who may not agree with our point of view and trust that the church has come thus far because of God's grace, and that no matter the changes, our God will oversee everything to work to His plan. We may Him at work or we may not, but nonetheless we must trust in His plan.

The Chinese national situation is complicated. What we know is limited. To react too quickly without knowing the politician's end game could lure us into a trap to be taken advantage of. We must trust that God will call upon the action of all the people in the magnitude of His kingdom. If anyone were to speak up, it should aim to respect and not rebuke those who choose to remain silent. There are even some who think we should cooperate with officials as long as we keep our faith. Regardless, pray that we will judge and act as moved by God.

¹Whole Text: Article 36 Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.

The State protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State.

Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

Source <URL: http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm>

² The full name of the document is "*THE BASIC VIEWPOINT ON THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION DURING OUR COUNTRY'S SOCIALIST PERIOD*", and can be found at <URL: <https://www.religlaw.org/content/religlaw/documents/doc19relig1982.htm>>

³ The full name of the document is "*Notice for the Chinese Communist Central Government and People's State Council Regarding Miscellaneous Issues In Religious Policy*" <URL: <http://www.waizi.org.cn/law/4969.html>>

⁴ In the video, it is said that US uses politics, culture, thought, organizations and different areas of society to disseminate influence. Interested parties can view at: https://youtu.be/M_8ISjcoSW8

⁵ In a research seminary convened in Beijing at the end of October, 2018, some mainland scholars indicated that there were not in fact 70 million or 80 million believers in China, but only 39.7 million. Moreover, they stated that churches were no longer growing as they were attempting to cool down. If the influence of Christianity is not so great, then there would be no need for greater suppression of church activities. For more, consult http://iwr.cssn.cn/xw/201810/t20181023_4722191.shtml and <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/B4JS1ri0IxPxM4W5ovdMxA>

⁶ For more details regarding this law, please consult http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm, please note that the Regulation on Religious Affairs applies to all religions, and not just to Christianity.

⁷ http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-03/21/content_5276191.htm#1

⁸ For example, Prof. Yeung Fung Kong of Purdue University in US adopted the sociology approach in analyzing the China Churches Development, estimated the population of Christians in China will be exceed those in US around 2025. This viewpoint arose China Religious Bureau's concern, and addressed as non-scientific and unrealistic. Some church workers shared with me, they worried this estimate will bring trouble to churches in China (It happened in 2015). If you want to learn more about the viewpoints of Prof. Yeung, please refer to "Seek Truth from Facts: The growth of Christianity in China" · printed on the newsletter of 《Divinity School of Chung Chi College (CUHK) and Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture (issue no.22, July, 2014) and his interview conducted by Council on Foreign Relations · 參 <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-china> · Also, you can refer to Ref. no.5 ·

⁹ During the China Church Seminar in November, 2015, author and Dr. Kwok Wai Kuen have speeches, and concluded this ministry as "low-tech ministry"(On that day, it wasn't have "low-tech population"). If Hong Kong churches only do that way, there will no more room for service, so it should consider the development strategy, mission, leadership development etc.

¹⁰ The "Outline for the Five-Year Plan for the Sinicization of Christianity in China (2018-2022)" published by the CCC/TSPM has the following text, "Protect the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, to be led by the core values of socialism, approval of national development directives, pathways, concepts and culture; to stand on Biblical teaching, to hold basic faith and core doctrines; insistence on independence and self-determination, and insistence on unity; to care equally for the universality and localness of the Church, learning from the acts of faith, spiritual experience and theological heritage from the universal Church; becoming part of the excellent traditional Chinese culture as well as advanced socialist culture; bearing bravely social responsibility, and actively seeking to be a part of society. For more, see: <http://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283>

Prayers

1. Regulating religious information on the Internet

The draft regulation recently announced by the National Religious Affairs Administration intends to regulate the distribution of religious information online. It includes 35 sections, covering the distribution of religious information in written messages, pictures, videos etc. on all kinds of online platforms including websites, apps, forums, blogs, weibo, public accounts, instant messaging tools, livestreaming etc. The deadline for the public to give feedback ended on October 9, but it remains to be announced when the regulation will take effect.



Whether based inside or outside China, a number of organizations are currently providing Christian information online. May the Lord ensure that true Christian news can still be freely distributed online and continue to encourage mainland leaders and believers.

2. Holding on to faith



Alongside a strict enforcement of religious policy in some mainland cities, control over religious activities has spread to the education sector. In Eastern China, some schools have asked students to fill in personal information forms, citing their own and their parents' religions. After being asked to meet with their teachers several times, students who confessed their Christian belief filled in "no religious belief" instead. Churches even said that teachers warned students that they would not be able to enter a good university or find good jobs should they not write "no religious belief".

May the Lord protect Christian students, help them gain true peace despite the threat, and give them courage to hold on to their faith. May He give Christian parents wisdom to bear witness to Him, and teach the truth to their children even at a difficult time.

3. Nurturing believers in a flexible mode

As churches in different provinces have suffered different degrees of blow, leaders of mainland churches need to think about how to nurture believers with flexibility. They should prepare to scrap some church-based training classes. Preachers should nurture more small group leaders and carry out discipleship training through small groups.



May the Lord lead mainland churches, and raise up more lay leaders at this time of increased religious control by the government. Even if church buildings are gone, believers can still learn about the truth, grow in faith in small groups and impact others as Christians.

4. Say No to polluted drinking water



improve drinking water safety in villages.

Since the Opening-up reform, the amount of industrial and township waste water, and the use of chemical fertilisers have kept increasing, polluting village drinking water and creating an excessive level of pollutants. Without purification and disinfection, direct consumption of the water can seriously endanger villagers' health. Since 2016, China has launched drives to ensure the safety of drinking water in rural villages. So far, the three provinces of Shandong, Chongqing and Gansu have completed works to

May the Lord help other provinces and cities to implement enhancing water safety measures to protect peasants' health and reduce the risks of the spread of infectious diseases, parasites and gastrointestinal disease etc.

~ THE END ~