Church-State Relations in China: Three Case Studies

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The book *A New History of Christianity in China*, by Daniel Bays, was published in 2012. What is new in this book is not merely a China-centered approach or simply using more Chinese resources but the reading of Chinese history from a new perspective. It brings to mind a comment by Jessie Lutz, who noted that “the history of Protestant Christianity in China is being rewritten from a new perspective, this time with greater attention to the Chinese side of the story.” Bays has given due attention to the Chinese side of the story, the development of indigenous movements in China, and especially the parts played by Chinese Christians such as Yu Guozhen, Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng), Jing Dianying, and Wang Mingdao. Bays proposes that these leaders and the Chinese Christians themselves will finally become the sole “owners” of the Chinese church.

In this article I focus on the theme of church-state relations in China, examining three cases from different periods in Chinese history. First, however, I review key features of Chinese Christianity since 1949.

Chinese Christianity since 1949

In the years after 1949 the attitude of the Chinese Communist government toward religion, and particularly toward Protestant Christianity, has been complex and changing. When the Communists began to rule Mainland China in 1949, Christianity was labeled as superstitious, unscientific, subjective, and contrary to the progressive, materialistic, and scientific doctrines of Marxism and Communism. Christian churches suffered much since the 1950s. Protestant denominations were abolished in 1958, and all church worship was forbidden in 1966. In 1979, however, to everyone’s great surprise, the churches were allowed to reopen. And then the issuance in 1982 of Document 19 (“Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country’s Socialist Period”) represented a radical change in government policy—in fact, the beginning of the *gaige kaifang* (“reform and opening up”) era in China.

Beginning in the 1980s, China witnessed a phenomenal surge of interest in Christianity among Chinese young people and intellectuals. According to official statistics, by 1999 there were 10 million Protestants, rising to 15 million in 2003. By 2013, the Protestant population had grown to 23 million. These figures, however, do not include the number of Christians in house churches and in other groups who have not registered with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). In its December 2011 report, the Pew Research Center estimated that there were 58 million Christians in China. Since foreign missionaries were expelled from China in the early 1950s, the growth of Chinese Protestants has been phenomenal indeed—on the order of sixtyfold! China now has the third highest number of Protestants in all the world.

In 1993 the government announced a new policy governing church-state relations. Somewhat surprisingly, it spoke in terms of fostering a working relationship between the two sides, a *xiang shi ying* (“mutually accommodating relationship”) between the officially registered churches and the Communist government. Despite attempts to oversee and control religious activities in China, the government’s policy on religion had become actually positive; it was moving toward a more open attitude to religion.

In a speech at the National United Front Work Conference held on November 7, 1993, President Jiang Zemin enunciated “three sentences for carrying out religious work well”:

- to be persistent, comprehensively and correctly, in implementing the Party’s policy on religion
- to strengthen control of religious affairs in accordance with the law
- to guide positively the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society

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It was the first time a top Chinese official had mentioned a policy of “mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society.” This was a very significant move, for it began to give religion more recognition in the socialist society of China. Instead of attempting to eliminate religion altogether, as in the old days, or mere toleration over a thirty-year period, now the talk was of religion being accepted as a permanent entity, provided it could be adapted to socialist society. Now, with the support of the Communist government, the TSPM and the officially registered churches could secure their legitimate and official status. The government in turn looks to the official churches to ensure that Christians continue as good citizens and work together with the government to build a more harmonie society (“harmonious society”) in China. Outside scholars might continue to accuse the Communist government of being oppressive, and critics might fault the officially registered churches for “selling their souls” to cooperate with the government and urge serious Christians to turn to the so-called underground churches. Others, however, have noticed that the Communist government was in fact showing increasing tolerance and that the official churches were finding legitimate ways to cooperate with the Communist government in order to survive under its rule. But were Chinese Christians themselves forced to cooperate with the government, or were they willing partners in what had so far been a very repressive environment?

Three Cases in Contemporary China

A look at three church-state scenarios in China will provide insight into local situations and allow us to see how Chinese Christians have interpreted these events.

Mu’en Tang (Moore Memorial Church), Shanghai. Mu’en Tang has a special place in Chinese history. It was built in 1886 by the American Methodist Episcopal Church South as the Central Methodist Church in Shanghai, later renamed Moore Memorial Church in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Lysander Royster Moore, who had given a large donation for the refurbishing of the church. Moore Memorial Church soon became a very important Christian church in Shanghai. It was the church of the Soong family, which included the father, Charlie Soong, a local pastor, and three sisters: Nancy Eling Soong, Rosamond Ching-ling, and Mayling. The church had a close relationship with the political leaders of Republican China, including Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek.

In 1930 Jiang Chang-chuan (Z. T. Kaung), pastor of Moore Memorial Church, baptized Chiang Kai-shek, the second president of Republican China. Jiang, ordained bishop in 1941, played a leading role in guiding the church to join anti-imperialist movements and, in cooperation with the government, being one of the first to sign the Christian Manifesto in 1950. He was also among the first to join the wide-scale accusation campaigns in China, which began in 1951, by publicly denouncing Methodist missionaries Sidney Anderson and Ralph Ward and his fellow bishop Chen Wenyyuan. Jiang was definitely a Christian, a Protestant pastor, and a Methodist bishop. How could a bishop do such things to his close friends and his colleagues in Christ? Certainly Jiang loved the church and was trying to find ways for the church to survive in China. Should he follow what Paul said and “be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1)? Or should he follow the example of Peter, who said that “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29)? Jiang’s choice was one of compromises, with a willingness to work cooperatively with the Communist government. Other Christians made different choices, such as refusing to join the TSPM and joining underground or unregistered house churches.

Bishop Jiang might have thought he was choosing the best way to protect the church. He could not have foreseen, however, that even more oppression was yet to come. In September 1958 all Protestant denominations in China were abolished, and so-called united worship began at Moore Memorial Church. The church had to give up all Methodist connections, and its name was changed to Mu’en Tang (“bathe together in God’s grace church”; though the English name remained Moore Memorial Church). This phrase is related to gongmu zhiu’en, namely, that all Christians, regardless of their denominations and theologies, can together bathe in God’s grace. But then in 1966 the Cultural Revolution began in China, and all churches, including Mu’en Tang, were closed. There was no choice; all religious activities had to go underground. Even though Mu’en Tang had been cooperative with the government, it was not spared all the restrictions and difficulties. Christians in China dared not express their faith in public and could only wait for the day when the situation might be changed.

Then, after twenty years of being cut off from its Methodist roots, Mu’en Tang was chosen as the first Protestant church in Shanghai to be reopened after the Cultural Revolution. Its first service was on Sunday, September 2, 1979. The church experienced phenomenal growth in the 1980s and subsequently has played a central role in the resurgence of the church in China. For instance, the church has been visited by many prominent church figures from overseas, including world-famous evangelists Billy Graham and Luis Palau, and by Rowan Williams, then archbishop of Canterbury. It also hosted services for World Women’s Prayer Day and World Prayers for Peace, as well as graduation ceremonies for the East China Theological Seminary, Shanghai.

Many of its pastors and church members became church leaders at both local and national levels. Pastor Sun Yanli, who had been in charge of the united worship when it was started in 1958, was appointed president of the East China Theological Seminary when it was reopened in 1985. Sun was also made bishop in 1988 and served until his death in 1995, at the age of eighty-one. Hua Yaozong, who was pastor-in-charge of Mu’en Tang from 1998 to 2004, succeeded Pastor Sun as president of the East China Theological Seminary in 1989. In 1997 Hua was also appointed as a member of the standing committee of the China Christian Council. Two of the church’s elders became leaders of the TSPM. Shou Jingzhen was appointed the head of Shanghai TSPM in 1997, and in 2007 Fu Xianwei was made the national chairman of the TSPM. It is amazing to see Mu’en Tang now a renowned church playing such a prominent role at the center stage of Chinese Christianity.

Protestant Churches in Wenzhou. Wenzhou is home to as many as 750,000 Protestant Christians, and its province, Zhejiang, counts more than 2,000 registered churches. Wenzhou itself has more than 1,000 large churches. Interestingly, in 1958, the beginning of the Mao era, the city was chosen as a model of wu zongjiao qu (“a religionless zone”). After the reopening of China thirty years later, however, a phenomenal growth of Christianity occurred in Wenzhou; it was reported that more than 500 churches were built during the decade of the 1980s. The flourishing of Wenzhou Christianity has continued, and today the city is known as the Jerusalem of the East. It has developed its own model of church, with major implications for a new understanding of Chinese Christianity.
Scholars have often politicized the issue of religious freedom in China by speaking in terms of a domination-resistance model, a binary construct of state domination and church resistance. The case of Wenzhou, however, reveals a different kind of church-state relationship. Wenzhou Christianity is characterized by the rise of an entrepreneurial class called “boss Christians.” According to Nan-lai Cao, these Christians are “economically powerful, politically connected, moralizing Christian entrepreneurs.” These Christian bosses have run their businesses very successfully; one could say they have been blessed by God. And they have gained much respect and recognition from government officials for their rising economic power and their contribution to society by paying their taxes and by maintaining guanxi (“a good relationship”) with the cadres.

These Christian bosses have also developed a new church model in Wenzhou. For instance, they run their own factories and enterprises and, at the same time, build local churches. Some enterprises are even named after biblical names, such as the Jianan [Canaan] Shoe Factory, the Boteli [Bethel] Button Factory, the Yisila [Ezra] Bookstore, and the Mijia [Micah] Valve Factory. There is also the Canaan Technology Group, also known as the Shenli (lit. “God power”) Group. Several have built a church within their factories, conducting services every morning, Sunday services, and weekly Bible study groups for the workers, most of whom are immigrants from other cities and live in the factory compound. Sometimes they invite local pastors to preach; sometimes the Christian factory owners themselves give the sermons. These religious activities are explicitly made part of the companies’ training programs, which are aimed at purifying the minds and raising the quality and morality of the workers. As one Christian boss said, he wanted “to create a Christianity-based moral culture” and “to let God’s Word govern the factory.” Many workers become Christians and are baptized in their factory.

The Christian bosses also seek to demonstrate the superiority of Christian morality in China by presenting Christian culture as “modern, progressive, and productive” and by showing that “being Christian means being good.” They believe that Christian morality has a much higher standard than the values of socialism. In 2006, when a morality campaign was launched in China and government officials propagated barong baru (the “Eight Honors and Disgraces”), Christian bosses highlighted the superiority of Christian morality by showing that these “Honors and Disgraces” were fully in accord with the teaching of the Bible. They prominently displayed these moral teachings, explaining that they were compatible with their personal goal, which was “to let God’s Word govern the factory.” As one Christian boss explained, currently our government advocates using morality to govern the country and build a harmonious society. . . . General Secretary Hu Jintao has brought up the notion of “Eight Honors and Disgraces.” These all reflect and confirm the value of morality. However, the foundation of morality is the Word. . . . Using the Word [of God] to govern the factory can not only enhance the overall quality of the people but more importantly change lives and renew minds, so that people can live a more meaningful life and find out what their personal values are.

Essentially, Christian bosses in Wenzhou have successfully created a new form of church-state relationship by their gaining recognition and respect both from government officials and from the society at large. They have also helped affirm the Christian moral culture in China by creating a Christianity-based enterprise culture that is modern, progressive, and productive.

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Chinese party-state. Their existence has become a symbol of China’s modern transformation. It is still too early to tell, however, whether these various forms of Christian practice will ultimately have an impact on Chinese government policy on religions and on the growth and development of Christian churches as a whole in China.21 Mark M ullins, a scholar in Japan, wrote a book with the somewhat strange title Christianity Made in Japan.22 The author presents a good example of how world Christianity takes shape in a particular national context. It has, so to speak, become localized in Japan, as it earlier became localized as so-called Western Christianity in Europe and in America. Now in the case of “Christianity Made in China,” we see that world Christianity has become a Christianity with Chinese socialist characteristics, as our examination of these three case studies in church-state relations reveals.

Notes
3. Regarding these topics, Bays remarked, “In almost all cases, the relevant historical materials concerning these organizations and individuals are in Chinese. That is one reason why they have often been overlooked by historians of Christianity in China, who have tended to remain fixed on the foreign missionary presence and the English-language materials that document it.” (Daniel Bays, ed., Christianity in China: The Eighteenth Century to the Present [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996], 309–10).
7. The countries with the largest number of Protestants are the United States (159 million), Nigeria (59 million), China (58 million), United Kingdom (38 million), South Africa (36 million), and Germany (28 million), www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf; see pp. 79–84.
9. For discussion, see Ng, “From Ideological Marxism to Moderate Pragmatism.”
10. Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tian’en), director of the Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong, holds this view. See his “TSPM Preaches Harmony but Breathes Threats,” China Prayer Letter, no. 22 (1982).
11. For instance, Philip Wickeri, who has worked closely with the China Christian Council and the Amity Foundation, holds this position. See his Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China’s United Front (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).
13. Richard Bush has commented that Jiang was “giving thoughtful leadership in a time of tumultuous change” (see his article “China: Resistant to Change—Ever Changing,” New World Outlook, May/June 1996, p. 39).
16. Ibid., 33–34.
17. Ibid., 33, 65.
18. Ibid., 65–68.
21. Two more recent events should be noted here. In December 2012 a petition signed by seventy-one Chinese academics and lawyers called upon the government to implement the provisions of the Chinese constitution regarding freedom of speech, of assembly, of publication, and of religion, as well as the freedom to demonstrate. In October 2013 a group of Chinese intellectuals organized a scholarly conference in England that published what has been known as the Oxford Consensus 2013.