

Toward a Nuanced View of the Protestant Christian Community in China

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When Western observers discuss the Protestant church in China, there is a strong tendency to assume that Chinese Christians fall into one or the other of two distinct and divided camps. One camp is variously referred to as Three-Self churches, Christian Council churches, registered churches, official churches, or even government churches. The other camp is referred to as unregistered churches, house churches, or underground churches. Along with this neat binary division all too often comes a Manichean tendency to associate one camp with darkness and the other with light ó which is which depending on the presuppositions of the observer.

When talking with people about Christianity in China, I find this binary, good guy/bad guy framework to be one of the biggest obstacles. Granted, it is often necessary to simplify when dealing with the unfamiliar, but I find this particular framework so overly simplified that it often forces people to shoehorn a particular group of Christians into a category that doesn't really fit them, generating more misunderstanding than insight. I feel we need to approach the task of trying to understand Christian groups in China with a somewhat more nuanced ó if still over-simplified framework - that has at least the five categories below.

Category 1: Churches associated with the China Christian Council (CCC) and Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). This is the segment of church life which is most visible to both visitors from outside China and to the Chinese public in general.

- ❖ Characteristics:
 - Urban.
 - Registered with the government.
 - Related to CCC/TSPM, hence part of a (loose) national organization.
 - Often have trained clergy.
 - Usually have a church building, may have other church property.
- ❖ As part of a national organization, these churches have been able to:
 - Reopen many old churches and build many new ones.
 - Set up an extensive system of seminaries, Bible schools, and lay training centers to train church leaders.
 - Publish many Bibles and other Christian literature.
 - Engage in public service activities (mostly local).
 - Give the church a public face, allow the church to impact public life.
- ❖ Problems faced by these churches:
 - Many congregations still lack trained leaders (though this is because the church is growing so rapidly).
 - Still associated to some degree with the excesses of the TSPM in the 1950s.
 - Their quasi-official status leads to charges that they are government-controlled.

Category 2: Meeting points related to the CCC/TSPM. Many Westerners are under

the mistaken impression that all groups meeting in homes are unregistered, hence presumably underground. However, many groups that meet in homes are associated with registered churches.

- ❖ Characteristics:
 - Meet in homes or other non-church structures.
 - Registered with the government and related to CCC/TSPM; often under the care of a larger (Category 1) urban church.
 - Often in or not far from an urban area.
 - Generally lead by lay leaders, though they are often also served to some degree by visiting clergy from Category 1 churches.
- ❖ Some of these gatherings eventually grow into Category 1 churches.

Category 3: “Semi-denominations” It is sometimes said that the Protestant church in China is now post-denominational, and it is true that many Chinese Christians have no sense of denominational affiliation. However, there are also Protestant groups in China that do have a sense of group (denominational) identity. Many come from indigenous Chinese groups such as the Little Flock, True Jesus Church, or Jesus Family (rather than denominations more familiar in Western mainline circles). Others, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, come from groups that originated outside China, and may still have ties to these overseas groups.

- ❖ Characteristics:
 - Such groups may have ties with the local CCC, but also maintain a degree of independence.
 - Some such groups are registered, some are not.
- ❖ Even though these groups have a sense of denominational distinctiveness, they are sometimes integrated into churches that are not of their denomination, worshipping alongside Christians of other traditions. In other cases they hold their own separate meetings in churches that also have services held by other Christians. In yet other cases they have their own churches, i.e. churches in which most or all people attending are members of the denomination/group.

Category 4: Urban unregistered groups. These are the groups often called “house churches” or “underground churches” that have made a clear choice not to register with the government or to associate with the CCC/TSPM.

- ❖ Characteristics:
 - Usually urban.
 - Sometimes have living memory of persecution from the 1950s through the 1970s, though an increasing number are formed of new Christians who have no memory of persecution before or during the Cultural Revolution.
 - Have consciously chosen not to register with the government for one or more of the following reasons:
 - They want government interference or (outside imposed) restrictions on their activity.
 - They don't want to be associated with other Christian groups whose theology differs from theirs.

- They feel it is wrong for the church to have any dealings with the government (often influenced by the teachings of Wang Mingdao).
- Their leaders have had personal conflicts with other local church leaders.
- Despite being called “underground churches,” they are often more accurately described as “low-profile” than “secret.” Often their presence is known to the local community.
- Because they are not legally registered, they are vulnerable to government harassment, though active persecution is relatively rare.
- Some such groups are actively hostile to registered Christian groups; others engage in a degree of cooperation.
- ❖ There are many gray areas in Christian life in China, and this is a good place to point out that many Chinese Christians who attend registered churches or meeting points may also have contact with unregistered Christian groups. In fact, in some places division between registered and unregistered groups is minimal, and there is a degree of interaction and mutual support between them.
- ❖ While some observers have argued that the vast majority of Chinese Christians fall into this category, such claims are often based on the questionable assumption that rural Christian groups belong in this category (see below), and may also be driven by a desire to portray this category of Christians as the main or only significant representatives of Christian life in China, so such claims need to be treated with caution.

Category 5: Rural Christian groups. One of the fastest growing segments of church life in China is found in the countryside among Christian groups that do not fit neatly into any of the categories above. Some outside observers mistakenly lump them in with urban unregistered Christians, but they are often quite different.¹

- ❖ Characteristics:
 - Found in villages in the countryside, hence often far away from organized Christian life in town and cities.
 - Often consist largely of people who have not been Christians more than a decade or so, and perhaps much less.
 - Tend to be run by strong lay leaders, often the Christians around which the group originally formed. Sometimes these leaders are relatively new Christians themselves.
 - Are often not “underground” ó their meetings are publicly known.
 - Are often not registered ó but this is due less to any opposition to registration than to the fact that registration is a “city” concept they know little about or which has little meaning for them.
 - May not have close affiliation with the CCC/TSPM, but may also not be opposed to such affiliation. How much such groups relate to the CCC/TSPM often depends on how far away the nearest CCC/TSPM organizations are, and also whether CCC/TSPM is of assistance to them in such matters as providing Bibles or sending clergy out for baptisms, communion, and so forth.

¹ Here my analysis draws heavily on the work of Dr. Leung Ka Lun of Alliance Seminary in Hong Kong.

- ❖ This is probably the category of Christians in which the most rapid growth is taking place ó after all, the overwhelming majority of China's population lives in the countryside. However, it is also the segment of church life viewed with the most concern, at least by Christians in the cities. The main problem is that even the leaders of these groups may have had relatively little formal Christian training and may not even have a very strong understanding of the Bible. The fact that they are relatively cut off from other parts of the church body makes it relatively easy for unusual ideas and practices, or even heresies, to take root (although problems with heresy are by no means confined to the countryside).

The discussion above may seem a bit dry, even academic, not least because I have tried to avoid falling into the õgood guy/bad guyö mode. I would concede that there is a time and a place for Christians to make value judgments. However, I feel the first step is to understand, and that the framework proposed above may be helpful in explaining the situation of the church in China in a way that is understandable yet not overly distorted.