



Background Paper

Protestants in China

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1. Overview

Protestant Christianity has been a prominent part of the general religious resurgence in China over the past three decades with the number of Protestants growing from fewer than one million in 1978 to more than 50 million today.¹ Protestants, usually referred to in China simply as ‘Christians’², are permitted to worship at officially registered Protestant churches and many millions do so. A far greater number of Protestants, however, worship at churches which are not officially registered (‘[house churches](#)’) and their situation varies from toleration to repression. The authorities have periodically attempted to force some unregistered churches to affiliate with the registered bodies, but these attempts have not been uniform throughout the country. In a country the size of China, the situation for Christians is not uniform or unchanging.³ In addition, there are several Protestant fringe groups, such as the Local Church or ‘Shouters’, which are labelled dangerous ‘evil cults’ by the Government and whose leaders and members often face repression.⁴

2. History

Protestant Christianity was first introduced into China by missionaries at the beginning of the 19th century. In the minds of many Chinese nationalists, the missionary movements coincided with political and commercial attempts to ‘open’ China to the West.⁵ In the 20th Century, the Chinese Protestant Church became largely indigenised and produced its own charismatic preachers. Between 1912 and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937), a number of indigenous churches were established including the Church of Christ, the True Jesus Church (1917), Jesus Family (1926) and Watchman Nee’s Little Flock (from which the Local Church later evolved) (1928).⁶

Despite such indigenisation, at the time of the Communist victory in 1949, Christianity was still seen as a ‘foreign religion’ by many Chinese and by the Communists. In 1954, to make the Protestant churches in China conform to the ideology and organisation of the new political system, the new Communist government and representatives of the Chinese churches founded Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), on the principles of self-administration, self-financing

¹ Kindopp, Jason & Hamrin, Carol Lee (eds), 2004, *God and Caesar in China*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., pp.1-2; US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July; Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.73 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

² In China, Catholics are referred to as ‘Catholics’ whereas Protestant Christians are generally referred to as ‘Christians’ rather than ‘Protestants’.

³ Bays, Daniel 2003, ‘Chinese Protestant Christianity Today’, *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174, No. 3, June, pp.488-504; US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

⁴ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July

⁵ The History section is largely taken from China Online Study Centre 2010, ‘Churches: Protestant’, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website <http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org/china_churches_protestant.html> Accessed 14 July 2011 with additional footnoted sources.

⁶ Cheng, M.M.C. 2003, ‘House Church Movements and Religious Freedom in China’, *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March, p.28.

and self-evangelisation.⁷ Some Chinese Christians chose not to join the TSPM on theological, political or personal grounds.⁸

Denominations were criticised as ‘relics of imperialism’ and by 1958 churches were increasingly merged, ecclesiastical hierarchies were harmonised and united services were held as the TSPM announced a ‘post-denominational era’.⁹ Financial and political constraints grew and many churches were closed during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Religious freedom deteriorated further following the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Virtually all churches were closed from the early 1960s to 1979 and many church leaders and believers were sent to prison or labour camps.¹⁰ All religious life and thinking was suppressed for over ten years, as vestiges of ‘feudal society’ or ‘imperialism’.¹¹

With the beginning of the ‘opening and reform’ economic policy which followed the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, churches were gradually refurbished and reopened and the China Christian Council (CCC) was formed under the leadership of Bishop K.H. Ting. Together, the CCC and TSPM form the *liang hui* (two committees) which supervise the registered Chinese churches throughout China.¹² Since 1978, Protestant Christianity has experienced a ‘spectacular resurgence’ in China, with the number of Protestants growing from less than one million in 1978 to more than 50 million today.¹³

3. Number of Adherents

There are probably between 50 and 90 million Protestants in China (estimates vary considerably), more of whom worship at unregistered churches rather than official churches. In 2010 the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) announced there were over 16 million registered Christians in China, worshipping in over 50,000 registered Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches¹⁴, though other sources claim there could be over 30

⁷ The organisation was initially found in 1950 and became the TSPM in 1954. Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong, 1993, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.23-24.

⁸ China Online Study Centre 2010, ‘Churches: Protestant’, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website <http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org/china_churches_protestant.html> Accessed 14 July 2011. For the reasons churches refuse to join the TSPM, see the section ‘Unregistered Churches/ Unregistered Protestant Groups’.

⁹ China Online Study Centre 2010, ‘Churches: Protestant’, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website <http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org/china_churches_protestant.html> Accessed 14 July 2011; Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong, 1993, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.25.

¹⁰ Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong, 1993, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.26,93,194.

¹¹ China Online Study Centre 2010, ‘Churches: Protestant’, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website <http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org/china_churches_protestant.html> Accessed 14 July 2011.

¹² China Online Study Centre 2010, ‘Churches: Protestant’, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website <http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org/china_churches_protestant.html> Accessed 14 July 2011.

¹³ Kindopp, Jason & Hamrin, Carol Lee (eds), 2004, *God and Caesar in China*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., pp.1-2; US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July

¹⁴ China Online Study Centre 2010, ‘Churches: Protestant’, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website <http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org/china_churches_protestant.html> Accessed 14 July 2011; US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July

million TSPM Christians.¹⁵ The Pew Research Centre estimates 50 million to 70 million Christians practice without state sanction.¹⁶ One Chinese scholar estimated in a public lecture at Renmin University that the number of Christians in China, including those in TSPM churches and unregistered churches, is near 90 million.¹⁷ (This represents 6-7% of the Chinese population.) Tony Lambert, an expert on Christianity in China, however says no-one is able to make accurate surveys of all house-church believers at the national or even provincial level and all reports of numbers 'are partial, may be exaggerated and, in most cases, almost certainly cannot give a fair or accurate estimate of the many other networks, let alone individual fellowships, which exist outside the informants' own limited range of first-hand knowledge.'¹⁸

4. Official Government Policy on Religion

The Chinese government policy on religion has been described as 'toleration with restrictions'¹⁹, and allows freedom of religious belief with limitations on religious practice.²⁰ The Chinese Constitution states that Chinese citizens 'enjoy freedom of religious belief.' It also bans the state, public organisations, and individuals from compelling citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion. The Constitution and laws protect only 'normal religious activities' that are overseen by the five (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant) state-sanctioned 'patriotic religious associations' (PRAs). Officials have wide latitude to interpret the phrase 'normal religious activities.'²¹ By law, only the PRAs may register religious groups and places of worship. The Government permits proselyting in registered places of worship and in private settings, but does not permit it in public, in unregistered places of worship, or by foreigners.²² The Constitution states that religious bodies and affairs are not 'subject to any foreign domination' and affirms the leading role of the, officially atheist, Chinese Communist Party (CCP).²³

In 1982, religious toleration was formally reinstated in a new edict of the CCP – 'The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Affairs during the Socialist Period of Our Country' –

¹⁵ Paul Hattaway claims that the SARA figures are a deliberate underestimate. Hattaway, Paul 2010, *How many Christians are there in China*, Asia Harvest website
<<http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/Christians%20in%20China/How%20Many%20Christians%20are%20There%20in%20China.pdf>> Accessed 24 February 2011..

¹⁶ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July

¹⁷ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – China*, 17 November.

¹⁸ Lambert, Tony 2013, 'Religious Statistics in China', *ChinaSource Quarterly*, Vol.14, No. 4, 7 January
<<http://www.chsource.org/en/articles/christianity-and-other-religions/item/224-religious-statistics-in-china>>
Accessed 26 February 2013

¹⁹ Huang, Jianbo and Yang, Fenggang 2005, 'The Cross Faces the Loudspeakers: A Village Church Perseveres Under State Power' in *State, Market and Religions in Chinese Societies*, eds Fenggang Yang and Joseph B Tamney, Brill, Leiden p.45.

²⁰ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July, Sec.II.; Potter, P. 2003 'Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China', in Daniel L. Overmeyer (ed), *Religion in China Today*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. pp.317, 321, 326.

²¹ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July

²² US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

²³ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

which has become known as ‘Document No. 19.’²⁴ This central document has served as the basis for the religious policy since then. ‘Document No. 19’ acknowledges that religion will exist for a long time before eventually withering away and that religious believers should be rallied for the central task of economic construction. It states that freedom of religious belief should be guaranteed as long as the believers love the country, support CCP rule, and observe the socialist laws. Since 1982, CCP and the government have issued a number of circulars and installed various formal ordinances and administrative orders, most notably the *Religious Affairs Regulations* in 2005. However, the basic policy remains the same— religious tolerance with restrictions.²⁵

5. Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC)

The Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)²⁶ and the China Christian Council (CCC) are the two organisations which lead the official Protestant Church in China. The TSPM is an overtly political organisation which oversees church policy and monitors foreign relations. The CCC is more pastoral and ecclesiastical in function. Together these are referred to as the ‘Two Associations’ (*liang hui*).²⁷ Many leading figures hold positions in both organisations concurrently.²⁸ The leadership of the TSPM/CCC is appointed by the government or the Party, but other members come from the local Christian community.²⁹

The TSPM/CCC is in turn supervised by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) (formerly called the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB))³⁰ – a government organisation under the State Council – and the United Front Work Department (UFWD) – an organ of the Chinese Communist Party. The UFWD and the SARA are responsible for implementing government and Party policies on religion.³¹

²⁴ CCP Central Committee 1982, ‘Document No. 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country’s Socialist Period’, March, Purdue University Center on Religion and Chinese Society website

<http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no_19_1982.pdf>.

²⁵ Huang, Jianbo and Yang, Fenggang 2005, ‘The Cross Faces the Loudspeakers: A Village Church Perseveres Under State Power’ in *State, Market and Religions in Chinese Societies*, eds Fenggang Yang and Joseph B Tamney, Brill, Leiden p.45; Potter, P. 2003 ‘Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China’, in Daniel L. Overmeyer (ed), *Religion in China Today*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

²⁶ The term ‘three-self’ refers to self-support, self-government and self-propagation.

²⁷ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.74 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

²⁸ Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong, 1993, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.58-9.

²⁹ Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong, 1993, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.59.

³⁰ The RAB became the SARA in 1998, though local offices of the SARA from the provincial level down often still use the word ‘bureau’. (Ashiwa, Yoshiko & Wank, David 2009, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, Stanford University Press, p.18)

³¹ Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong, 1993, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.53-9.

The TSPM is not a Church organisation. It is a body set up specifically to act as an interface and conduit between the registered, and therefore government-recognised, churches and the offices of the Religious Affairs Bureau (government) and the United Front Work Department (Communist Party). The China Christian Council is less political and more 'pastoral' in function: it co-ordinates and assists the churches with training of lay leaders, published materials, etc.³²

6. Registered Churches

A registered church is a congregation that has chosen to comply with the government regulations for registration of places of worship and has met six general requirements. The six requirements for registration:

1. The congregation must have a fixed place
2. The congregation must have a fixed name.
3. There must be citizens who are religious believers regularly participating in religious activities.
4. They must have a management organisation composed of citizens who are religious believers.
5. They must have persons meeting the requirements of the particular religious group to lead religious services.
6. They must have their own legal source of income.³³

Although registration should not require a congregation to join either the TSPM or the CCC,³⁴ (Article 6 of the 2005 Religious Affairs regulations allows churches to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs without the need to register with the appropriate patriotic association³⁵), in practice churches who refuse to join the TSPM have been refused registration.³⁶

TSPM churches are registered under the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), hence they are legal. They are thus free to build chapels, which they do with the government's approval.³⁷ Government support comes in the form of training future pastors in two seminaries, but since many students reject the TSPM's liberal interpretations of theology, there is a shortage of pastors in official churches. The government also pays TSPM church pastors and other church workers. Salaries are not high, but they are adequate, and given the shortage of

³² Bays, Daniel 2003, 'Chinese Protestant Christianity Today', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174, No. 3, June, p.490, footnote 9.

³³ Sutterlin, J. 2005, 'Frequently asked questions about the Protestant church in China', *Amity News Service* website, June <<http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1150>> Accessed 18 February 2009.

³⁴ Sutterlin, J. 2005, 'Frequently asked questions about the Protestant church in China', *Amity News Service* website, June <<http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1150>> Accessed 18 February 2009.

³⁵ Fielder, Caroline 2007, 'Real change or mere rhetoric? – An evaluation of the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs a year on', *China Study Journal*, Spring/Summer, p.42.

³⁶ Fielder, Caroline 2007, 'Real change or mere rhetoric? – An evaluation of the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs a year on', *China Study Journal*, Spring/Summer, p.42.

³⁷ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.75 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

employment a job is guaranteed.³⁸ Being legal also means that there are no restrictions on the size of TSPM congregations, and numbers of 1,000 to 2,000 are not uncommon. It also means that TSPM churches can take active roles in society, and many individual churches do indeed carry out philanthropic projects.³⁹

The government also exercises control over registered churches. Seminary training is in accordance with government-approved theology and ideology, part of which is the stress on the mutual adaptation of socialism and religion as well as political study ‘to train young patriotic religious personnel who support socialism and the leadership of the Party’. TSPM officials are also supposed to ensure that sermons delivered in recognised churches are in accordance with party proscriptions; this means avoiding taboo subjects such as the Armageddon and the Second Coming.⁴⁰

7. Unregistered Churches/ Unregistered Protestant Groups

A majority of Protestant [house churches](#) refuse to register or affiliate with the TSPM/CCC. Some groups believe the TSPM/CCC accepts rules imposed by the Government that conflict with their religious convictions. In particular, some house churches have objected to the TSPM/CCC’s restrictions on evangelism, baptism, and receiving religious materials from abroad.⁴¹ Moreover, some groups disagree with the TSPM/CCC teachings that differences in the tenets of the various Protestant creeds can be reconciled or accommodated under one ‘post-denominational’ religious umbrella organisation. Others have not sought registration due to fear of adverse consequences if they reveal, as required, the names and addresses of church leaders or members. Unregistered groups also frequently do not affiliate with one of the PRAs for fear that doing so would allow government authorities to regulate sermon content and speakers.⁴²

Unregistered churches are formally illegal.⁴³ However unregistered groups should not be equated with groups which have been declared ‘evil cults’ (see [section on Cults](#)). While, strictly speaking, both groups are illegal (as they operate outside the registration process), in practice unregistered religious groups are sometimes treated with a certain level of tolerance, while individuals belonging to ‘cults’ are ruthlessly pursued.⁴⁴

³⁸ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.75 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

³⁹ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.76 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

⁴⁰ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.75 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013; Bays, Daniel 2003, ‘Chinese Protestant Christianity Today’, *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174, No. 3, June, p.492.

⁴¹ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – China*, 17 November.

⁴² US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – China*, 17 November.

⁴³ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.76 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013;

⁴⁴ Fielder, Caroline 2007, ‘Real change or mere rhetoric? – An evaluation of the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs a year on’, *China Study Journal*, Spring/Summer, p.35.

Some unregistered religious groups have significant membership, property, financial resources, and networks. Despite some instances of non-interference, house churches face more risks when their memberships grow, they arrange for regular use of facilities for religious activities, or they forge links with other unregistered groups or co-religionists overseas.⁴⁵

In some areas, government authorities pressure house churches to affiliate with one of the PRAs and to register with religious affairs authorities by organising registration campaigns and by detaining and interrogating leaders who refuse to register. In other parts of the country unregistered groups have grown rapidly and the authorities do not pressure them to register.⁴⁶

8. House Churches⁴⁷

The term ‘house churches’ (家庭教会 *jiating jiaohui*) in China usually refers to unregistered Protestant communities or congregations that conduct religious services without government approval in the homes of believers.⁴⁸ They are usually informal gatherings, usually in small groups of no more than fifty, although the size of house churches can vary considerably.⁴⁹ In most cities they are small – often under twenty people, because larger numbers attract hostile attention from the authorities. However, in rural areas they may be very large, numbering hundreds of people. Many house churches function as independent churches. Others consider themselves part of a large, organised network stretching across many provinces, or even the entire country.⁵⁰ The authorities label these churches as ‘spontaneous private meetings’, but they are called ‘house churches’ by the believers themselves.⁵¹

House churches have a long history in China. Before the Revolution many small groups of Christians used to meet together in the home for worship especially in areas where there were few believers and no regularised church buildings. Certain indigenous churches which sprang up in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the ‘Little Flock’ founded by Watchman Nee, stressed the importance of close fellowship in small group meetings. After the communist victory in 1949 they were better placed to survive under the new conditions than the more formal mainline denominations.⁵²

⁴⁵ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – China*, 17 November.

⁴⁶ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – China*, 17 November.

⁴⁷ Schak notes that most commentators prefer the term ‘unregistered churches’ to ‘house churches’ as some members of registered (TSPM-affiliated) churches also prefer to meet in each other’s homes for convenience. (Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.74 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013).

⁴⁸ Cheng, M.M.C. 2003, ‘House Church Movements and Religious Freedom in China’, *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March, p.16.; Bays, Daniel 2003, ‘Chinese Protestant Christianity Today’, *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174, No. 3, June, p.491.

⁴⁹ Kindopp, Jason 2004, ‘Fragmented yet Defiant: Protestant Resilience under Chinese Communist Party Rule’ in Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (eds), *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, p.128.

⁵⁰ Lambert, T. 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, pp.55-6.

⁵¹ Lambert, T. 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, p.56.

⁵² Lambert, T. 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, p.54.

In many areas of China where the Church is strong, such as Henan, Zhejiang and Fujian, the situation can be quite complicated. There are large and small registered TSPM churches, as well as many 'meeting points'. Some of these have registered with the authorities, some await registration, some have been refused registration and been formally disbanded. (They usually disperse and spring up again meeting at a different location.) and yet others refuse to apply for registration.⁵³

May M.C. Cheng, in a significant paper on the house church movement in China, stresses that organisationally the movement does not form a coherent structure 'with a single leadership, purpose or ideology'.⁵⁴ House churches vary from Pentecostal, to conservative Evangelical type to some very exclusivist groups, which reject the validity of any other group. Some house churches, however, are more conciliatory and willing to work together, or even work with Three-Self churches.⁵⁵ In 2009, a one-year, government-commissioned study on house churches determined that Protestant house church members numbered between 45 and 60 million, with another 18 to 30 million attending government-approved churches.⁵⁶

9. Protestant Denominations in China

Traditional Protestant denominations, such as the Methodist, Anglican, Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, were abolished in China in the 1950s and the TSPM/CCC is officially 'post-denominational', meaning that it seeks to encourage unity and eliminate differences in belief among the various traditions. In some areas, different denominational traditions remain visible within the TSPM. For example, in some churches the style of worship is more ceremonial, in others it is more in the 'free church' tradition⁵⁷. One congregation may even offer several different styles of worship. But the clear cut divisions and denominational boundaries which are commonplace in the West do not apply in China – in general the old denominations have disappeared leaving only traces in theology and ritual such as a few TSPM churches which still retain an Anglican or Methodist character.⁵⁸

There are a number of major indigenous churches, all founded after World War 1, which have managed to survive. These include the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family and the Little Flock. Unlike the Western denominations these groupings have preserved their own strong identity and ethos. Even where they have joined the TSPM, they hold their own services in registered churches separately from other Christians. Many however prefer to meet

⁵³ Lambert, T. 2006, *China's Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, p.56.

⁵⁴ Cheng, M.M.C. 2003, 'House Church Movements and Religious Freedom in China', *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March, p.18 & 29.

⁵⁵ Tang, E. 2002, 'Yellers' and healers – 'Pentecostalism' and the study of grassroots Christianity in China', Geocities website, September <http://www.geocities.com/ccom_ctbi/ccom_AGM_files/020913-15_Edmund_Tang_CCOM_AGM.htm> Accessed 22 December 2008..

⁵⁶ 'China: Office Becomes New Force For Religious Repression' 2009, *Compass Direct News*, 3 July <<http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/china/4045>> Accessed 10 August 2009.

⁵⁷ The free-church tradition does not have a fixed liturgy or rules for governing the context and conduct of worship. (Weaver, J. D. 2002, *Presbyterian Worship: A Guide for Clergy*, Louisville, KN, Geneva Press.p.30 cited in Tang, A 2007, 'Spiritual Formation Practices in the Early Church to the Reformed Tradition Period', Kairos Spiritual Formation website <http://www.kairos2.com/SF_church.htm – Accessed 17 January 2012.

⁵⁸ Lambert, T. 2006, *China's Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, pp.57-59.

independently as house churches.⁵⁹ There are also more recent indigenous churches, such as the Full Scope Church, New Testament Church, the Pure Heart Church, South China Church and the Henan Pentecostals, which have many believers. Lastly there are a number of Christian-inspired 'heretical cults' (in government parlance) such as Eastern Lightning and the Local Church which have a combined following into tens of millions (see the next two sections below).⁶⁰

Though house churches are ostensibly independent, many belong to one of several large, hierarchical religious groups.⁶¹ These large house church groupings (called 'networks' or 'streams') have developed over the last 30 years. The largest, the Fangcheng church based in Henan, claims to have a loosely-knit flock of 10 million believers.⁶² The World Christian Database estimates there are more than 300 such unofficial house church networks.⁶³

10. Protestant Beliefs and Practices

Protestant belief and practice in China is characterised by its diversity, by the prevalence of evangelical and charismatic beliefs, by the lack of biblical knowledge amongst many clergy, and by the influence of traditional Chinese culture on Christian practice. Theologically there is no split between registered and unregistered churches, the differences being mainly political.

Theologically, Protestant churches in China are very diverse:

They range from the wildly charismatic to the ultra-conservative and all shades in between. All accept the Bible as the word of God and, although overseas categories do not always apply neatly, they may be regarded as 'evangelical' and sometimes even 'fundamentalist.' All believe that the sovereign God is alive and able to heal and work miracles in answer to prayer— however, this, again, does not mean that all can be neatly labelled 'charismatic' in the overseas sense.⁶⁴

Tony Lambert⁶⁵ notes certain characteristics which are common amongst many widely varying groups of Chinese Christians:

- Hunger for God's word and delight in in-depth exposition (sermons lasting 1-2 hours are common);

⁵⁹ Sutterlin, J. 2005, 'Frequently asked questions about the Protestant church in China', *Amity News Service* website, June <<http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1150>> Accessed 18 February 2009.

⁶⁰ Tang, Edmond 2008, 'The changing landscape of Chinese Christianity', *China Study Journal*, Spring/Summer, p.33.

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch 2006, *China: A Year After New Regulations, Religious Rights Still Restricted*, 1 March.

⁶² Lambert, T. 2006, *China's Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, p.66. The five largest house church networks in China are: China for Christ/Fang Cheng Church (Henan Province); The China Gospel Fellowship/Tanghe (Henan); The Li Xin Church (Anhui Province); the Yin Shang Church, (Anhui Province); and the Word of Life Church/'Born Again Movement (of Peter Xu) – Wesley, Luke 2004, 'Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, Vol.7, No.2, p.230 <<http://www.aps.edu/ajps/04-2/04-2-LWesley.pdf>> Accessed 2 February 2007.

⁶³ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – China*, 17 November.

⁶⁴ Lambert, Tony 2006, 'House-Church Networks: An Overview', *Global Chinese Ministries Newsletter*, March, April & May (Parts 1, 2 & 3).

⁶⁵ Commentator on Christianity in China and author of *China's Christian Millions*.

- Intensity in prayer, both private and communal;
- Zeal for personal evangelism;
- Belief in the supernatural which takes the Scriptures at face value;
- Concern for truth and right doctrine (often leading to acrimonious divisions);
- Willingness to suffer for the gospel;
- Centrality of the cross and atonement of Christ⁶⁶

No great theological differences exist between registered churches and unregistered churches and many Chinese Christians attend both, according to American theologian Dr K.K. Yeo.⁶⁷ Dr Yeo visited the official seminaries and Bible colleges of the Three-Self movement and found the sermons preached in registered churches were as biblical as any lectures and sermons of evangelical seminaries and churches in the U.S. He likewise noted that the great attention to biblical studies in the unregistered churches did not indicate high orthodoxy and that there were many heresies and superstitions in these churches, especially in rural areas. Yeo notes that the difference between registered and unregistered churches is in political attitude towards cooperation with the government. Most unregistered churches do not believe that Christianity should collaborate with a government that does not love or honour God. By and large, they don't find the communist government a trustworthy partner or think that the state's fallenness is redeemable. Many unregistered churches attempt to focus on theology and to be detached from politics.⁶⁸ Theological tensions remain between the supernatural-oriented teaching of many rural churches and the more social and academic oriented theology of the seminaries. Relations between registered and unregistered communities can be strained but in many places movement of believers between the two communities is fluid.⁶⁹

Charismatic beliefs⁷⁰ and Pentecostal Christianity⁷¹ are also popular among house churches.⁷² Luke Wesley claims the overwhelming majority of the Christians in China today are at least

⁶⁶ Lambert, Tony 2006, 'House-Church Networks: An Overview', Global Chinese Ministries Newsletter, March, April & May (Parts 1, 2 & 3).

⁶⁷ Yeo, K. K. 2006, 'Home Grown', *The Christian Century*, 10 January.

⁶⁸ Yeo, K. K. 2006, 'Home Grown', *The Christian Century*, 10 January.

⁶⁹ Chinese Christian Three-Self Movement Committee 2008, *Church Order of Protestant Churches in China* (Adopted January 8, 2008, at the Joint (National) Conference of the Seventh Standing Committee of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches in China and the Fifth Standing Committee of the China Christian Council), Amity News Service Website, 8 January <<http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1915&pointer>> Accessed 22 July 2011.

⁷⁰ Charismatics believe in spiritual healing, miracles, casting out of demons, prophecy, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, and that signs and wonders should accompany the preaching of the gospel. Wesley describes them as 'those Christians who believe that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10, including prophecy, tongues, and healing, are available to the Church today'. (Wesley, Luke 2004, 'Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, Vol.7, No.2, p.228 <http://www.pts.edu/aeimages/File/AJPS_PDF/04-2-LWesley.pdf>).

⁷¹ Pentecostals are closely associated and affiliated with Charismatics, the two terms often being used interchangeably. Wesley describes Pentecostals as 'those Christians who believe that all of the gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10 are available to the Church today and who also believe that the Bible encourages every believer to experience a 'Baptism in the Spirit', an empowering for service distinct from regeneration.10. (Wesley, Luke 2004, 'Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, Vol.7, No.2, p.228 <http://www.pts.edu/aeimages/File/AJPS_PDF/04-2-LWesley.pdf>). Pentecostals believe that all Christians should seek to be filled with him. The Spirit's 'filling', 'falling upon', 'coming upon', or being 'poured out upon' believers is called the baptism with the Holy Spirit. – Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, 1983, (Los Angeles: Foursquare Media, 2008), pp.308-9.

charismatic, and that a significant majority of the Christians in China today are not only charismatic, but also Pentecostal in their theological orientation.⁷³ Jason Kindopp in his 2004 paper on Protestant resilience under the PRC notes that a division between evangelical and charismatic exists within the house churches:

An evangelical-charismatic rift further divides the house church movement. Evangelicals, who trace their roots to the evangelical doctrines of Western missionaries and to conservative Chinese pastors such as Wing Mingdao, hold literalist views of the Bible and emphasise expository preaching in their worship. China's charismatic Protestants, by contrast, are doctrinally subjective, stressing demonstrations of the Spirit over theological rigor. They are also supernaturalist, relying heavily on faith healings to attract new converts.⁷⁴

Similarly Schak identifies three major divisions in present-day Protestantism in China: Pentecostals (*ling'enpai*), evangelicals (*fuyinpai*), and "reform" or new city churches (*gaigepai* or *chengshi xinxing jiaohui*):

They differ in style of worship and orientation toward religion. The largest are the evangelicals, subdivided into conservative, likened to conservative evangelical Christians in the US, and liberal, likened to Billy Graham. Next largest are the Pentecostals. Both of these are predominantly rural, which also means that members and leaders are less educated. Evangelicals are less studied, but one thing known about them is that they take a very literalist view of scripture, though they often interpret it allegorically. They also tend to be theologically conservative.

Pentecostal churches are also conservative and are strongly egalitarian. Their religious focus is on the Holy Spirit and on spiritual gifts, a major difference between them and evangelicals. Aside from loud prayer and speaking in tongues during worship, they also engage in spirit singing and dancing, and they believe very strongly in faith healing through prayer or laying on of hands. Several observers have likened their form of Christianity to folk religion in its egalitarianism and utilitarianism. They stress the miraculous and the supernatural, healing and prophecy; their religion is intensely millenarian, giving its followers both a hope and an assurance in times of uncertainty caused by natural calamities and poverty, political tension, and a sense of meaninglessness of life.

...

The reform congregations are exclusively urban and well-educated. They tend toward a more Calvinist theology. In terms of religious orientation, we can classify the evangelicals as conservative and strongly literalist believers, the Pentecostals as folk believers who worship Jesus as a powerful or efficacious deity who can answer prayers and grant requests, and the reformed as ethical Christians for whom the ethical aspects of Christianity – Christian values and leading a Christian life – are shared alongside notions of salvation. The reform approach is

⁷² US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – China*, 17 November. Sec.2.

⁷³ Wesley, Luke 2004, 'Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, Vol.7, No.2, pp.251-2 <http://www.aps.edu/aeimages/File/AJPS_PDF/04-2-LWesley.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'Fragmented yet Defiant: Protestant Resilience under Chinese Communist Party Rule' in Kindopp, Jason & Hamrin, Carol Lee (eds), 2004, *God and Caesar in China*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., p.135.

probably closer to that of TSPM leaders, whose championing of Christianity is also for its ethics and values but which plays down faith and the need for belief.⁷⁵

Part of the house church sector of Protestants descends from Chinese independent churches founded early in the 20th century as a reaction against the missionary-run churches. These churches, such as Watchman Nee's 'Little Flock' or the True Jesus Church, were critical of the hierarchy and institutional complexity of Western denominations. Most sought a return to primitivist Christianity, and put stress on direct spiritual experience of conversion or supernatural acts such as healing or prophecy, as well as practising considerable autonomy for local congregations. Today, many in the autonomous Christian communities preserve the theological traditions and practices of these independent churches, especially Pentecostals, whose overt manifestations of being moved by the Holy Spirit (such as speaking in tongues, praying loudly en masse, healing practices) are frowned on in most TSPM churches because in their view they appear too much like superstition rather than religion.⁷⁶

The influence of Chinese traditional culture on Christian practice is also great. The great majority of Chinese Protestants live in rural areas, and many have only minimal knowledge of the Christian doctrines and ritual behaviour that would be familiar to most urban Christians. In their 1993 study, Hunter and Chan claimed that in understanding the appeal of Christianity to many Chinese, especially in the countryside, we must realise that in practical terms 'many Christian activities ... are closely related to traditional cultural patterns.' They went on to specify many of those linkages to traditional popular culture, such as in the function of prayer, requests for healing, charismatic phenomena like shamanism, moral norms, ideas about sin and salvation, and the pragmatic aspects of conversion. In many ways, the tone of Chinese Protestantism on the local level of practice is very different from that of the West, despite having similar doctrinal tenets.⁷⁷

The Economist gave this example of house church practice in China, which indicates both the variety of religious practice and the varying quality of religious leadership in Chinese Protestant churches:

In a suburb of Shanghai, neighbours peer warily across the hallway as visitors file into a living room, bringing the number to 25, the maximum gathering allowed by law without official permission. Inside, young urban professionals sit on sofas and folding chairs. A young woman in a Che Guevara T-shirt blesses the group and a man projects material downloaded from the internet from his laptop onto the wall. Heads turn towards the display and sing along: 'Glory, Glory Glory; Holy, Holy, Holy; God is near to each one of us.' It is Sunday morning, and worship is beginning in one of thousands of house churches across China... Because most Protestant house churches are non-denominational (that is, not affiliated with Lutherans, Methodists and so on), they have no fixed liturgy or tradition. Their services are like Bible-study classes. This puts a heavy burden on the pastor. One of the Shanghai congregation who

⁷⁵ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, pp.77-78 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

⁷⁶ Bays, Daniel 2003, 'Chinese Protestant Christianity Today', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174, No. 3, June, pp.494-5.

⁷⁷ Bays, Daniel 2003, 'Chinese Protestant Christianity Today', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174, No. 3, June, pp.495-6.

has visited a lot of house churches sighs with relief that ‘this pastor knows what he is talking about.’⁷⁸

11. Cults, sects and heterodox Protestant groups

Chinese law criminalises some Christian groups⁷⁹ as ‘evil cults’⁸⁰, judicially defined in 1999 as ‘those illegal organisations that have been established under the guise of religion, Qigong or other forms, deifying their leading members, enchanting and deceiving others by concocting and spreading superstitious fallacies, recruiting and controlling their members and endangering the society.’⁸¹ The following ‘Christian-related’ groups are banned as ‘cults’: the [Local Church](#) (also called the ‘Shouters’), Established King, Lightning From the East, Lord God Sect, Lingling Sect, All Scope Church, South China Church, Disciples Sect (Narrow Gate), Three Ranks of Servants, Cold Water Sect, Commune Sect, New Testament Church/Apostles Faith Sect, Resurrection Sect, Dami Evangelization Association, and World Elijah Evangelism Association.⁸²

Groups banned as ‘evil cults’ are seen as a serious danger to society and to government control, and both leaders and followers of these groups have been subject to arrest and imprisonment. As Kindopp points out, the government is more concerned with suppressing organisations with the capacity of staging large-scale actions than it is with the putative antisocial nature of these organisations.⁸³ Kindopp further notes: ‘The common denominator of the listed “cults” is their size and organizational virtuosity. Most have built up astonishingly large followings in a short period of time.’⁸⁴ The government launched major eradication campaigns against the Local Church in the 1980s⁸⁵, and its offshoot Eastern Lighting in the early 2000s⁸⁶, in which thousands of members were arrested, and the leaders subjected to long prison terms. Despite

⁷⁸ ‘Christianity in China – Sons of heaven’ 2008, *The Economist*, 2 October

<http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12342509>

⁷⁹ Many non-Christian groups, such as the Falun Gong, have also been classified as ‘evil cults’.

⁸⁰ The term *xie jiao* is now translated ‘evil cult’. Though *xie jiao* was translated as ‘heterodox teaching’ in other periods of Chinese history, in the 21st century the notion of ‘evil cult’ has been increasingly used as the official translation. (Chen, Nancy N. 2003, ‘Healing Sects and Anti-Cult Campaigns’, *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No.2, p.510)

⁸¹ US Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2012, *Annual Report 2011*, 10 October, p.85

<<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112shrg76190/pdf/CHRG-112shrg76190.pdf>>

⁸² Yang Fenggeng 2012, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp.103–5. The US Department of State gives variations of these names: the Local Church (‘Shouters’), Eastern Lightning, the Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui), Full Scope Church, Spirit Sect, New Testament Church, Three Grades of Servants (or San Ban Pu Ren), Association of Disciples, Lord God Sect, Established King Church, Unification Church, Family of Love, and the South China Church (US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July).

⁸³ Kindopp, Jason 2002, ‘China’s war on “cults”’, *Current History*, Vol. 101, September, p.262

⁸⁴ Kindopp, Jason 2002, ‘China’s war on “cults”’, *Current History*, Vol. 101, September, p.262

⁸⁵ Kindopp, Jason 2004, *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party-State*, 16 May, George Washington University Thesis, p.454.

⁸⁶ Forney, M 2001, ‘Jesus Is Back, and She’s Chinese’, *Time*, 5 November

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,181681,00.html>> Accessed 14 March 2013

official repression, both groups have proved resilient, continuing to attract new converts and expand their operations in China.⁸⁷

One of the major pressures faced by autonomous Protestant communities is the fear that the authorities can brand any group outside the registered churches as a cult. Once a group receives such a label it is virtually impossible to remove it.⁸⁸ There are no public criteria for determining, nor procedures for challenging, such a designation.⁸⁹ The results can be severe – arrest, fines and even imprisonment. Thus it is a concern of the major house church networks to protest their orthodoxy.⁹⁰ Protestant communities have been concerned by some of the new ‘cults’, and particularly by Eastern Lightning because they consider it heretical, and because the vast majority of its converts are drawn from Protestant house-church congregations.⁹¹ Eastern Lightning focuses on evangelising Christians because they are thought less likely than the general population to inform the authorities of their activities.⁹²

12. The Local Church (‘Shouters’)⁹³

The Local Church (pejoratively referred to by the government and other groups as the ‘Shouters’) was one of the first Protestant groups to be labelled as an ‘evil cult’ by authorities and targeted in a nationwide crackdown in the early 1980s. An offshoot of the biblically-based Little Flock, the Local Church looks to Witness Lee – Li Changshou – for inspiration. Li, based first in Taiwan and then California, ‘made no secret of his virulent anti-Communism’ and his close political ties with the Kuomintang government in Taiwan. According to Tony Lambert in *China’s Christian Millions*:

The movement in China was characterised by strong hostility to both the Three Self movement and the government. Lee had developed close political ties with the Nationalist authorities in Taiwan and made no secret of his virulent anti-Communism. In China his followers sought to take over assemblies, indulged in aggressive evangelism and denounced the government. In July 1983 the authorities responded by launching a nationwide crackdown. Thousands were arrested and many key leaders imprisoned for long periods of time. However, this, and the death of Lee himself on 9 June 1997, has not destroyed the movement which still remains strong in many areas.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Kindopp, Jason 2004, *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party-State*, 16 May, George Washington University Thesis, p.430.; Anderlini, J. 2012, ‘China cult targeted as ‘doomsday’ nears’, *The Financial Times*, 20 December <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b23f7d90-4a95-11e2-968a-00144feab49a.html#axzz2NUEOTkdz>> Accessed 14 March 2013

⁸⁸ Lambert, Tony 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, 2nd edn, OMF Publishing, Monarch Books, London p.69.

⁸⁹ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

⁹⁰ Lambert, Tony 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, 2nd edn, OMF Publishing, Monarch Books, London p.69.

⁹¹ Dunn, Emily C. 2009, “‘Cult,’ Church, and the CCP: Introducing Eastern Lightning”, *Modern China*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Jan, p.107

⁹² Dunn, Emily C. 2009, “‘Cult,’ Church, and the CCP: Introducing Eastern Lightning”, *Modern China*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Jan, p.107

⁹³ For more detailed information about the situation of the Local Church, see RRT Country Advice Local Church in China Background Paper (January 2013)

⁹⁴ Lambert, Tony 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, 2nd edn, OMF Publishing, Monarch Books, London p.136.

While Local Church repression was particularly harsh during the 1980s and 1990s, over the last ten years official tactics have evolved, lengthy judicial sentences giving way to short-term administrative detentions and large fines often imposed on unrepentant church figures.⁹⁵

13. Treatment of Protestants in China

Protestants in China are permitted to worship at officially registered Protestant churches and many millions do so unhindered by the government. A larger number of Protestants however worship at churches which are not officially registered and there are periodic attempts by the authorities to force some of these churches to join the registered bodies. These attempts are not identical throughout the country and have varied in intensity in different places at different times. In a country the size of China, the situation for Christians is not uniform or unchanging.⁹⁶

According to David Schak, here are tens of thousands of unregistered churches in China, most of which carry out their business with little if any trouble from the local authorities.⁹⁷ However, in a small number of cases, governments have taken sometimes quite severe actions against particular churches resulting in their closure; the destruction of church property; the confiscation (or looting) of church assets or materials; their fragmenting into much smaller congregations; and even the jailing of leadership personnel. Although actions taken are couched in legal justifications, the present relationship between house churches and government is not governed by law but is best described as closer to a 'metaphorical social contract based on incomplete or unarticulated understandings of what is and is not permissible'.⁹⁸

Some unregistered Protestant Churches deemed by the Chinese government to threaten national security or social harmony can face severe restrictions. The government actively but arbitrarily restricts, harasses, intimidates, detains, and imprisons: groups that are not registered, or will not register, for political or theological reasons; individuals who publicly organise legal, media, or popular defence of religious freedom; and groups or leaders deemed to threaten the Communist Party. Variations in implementation allows most unregistered groups to function in China, but this limited tolerance did not amount to official recognition of these groups' rights..⁹⁹

⁹⁵ For more detailed information about the situation of the Local Church, see RRT Country Advice Local Church in China Background Paper (January 2013).

⁹⁶ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

⁹⁷ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.85 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

⁹⁸ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.85 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

⁹⁹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012, 'China', *Annual Report 2012*, March, p.146 <[http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)> Accessed 18 March 2013; US Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2012, *Annual Report 2011*, 10 October, pp.14-15 <<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112shrg76190/pdf/CHRG-112shrg76190.pdf>> Accessed 18 March 2013

It is difficult to assess the extent of government pressure on unregistered Protestant churches in China, due to restrictions on reporting in official media. The most comprehensive attempt to provide statistics on Christians detained or imprisoned is the annual report of ChinaAid, a Christian advocacy group.¹⁰⁰ The most recent report claims that 1,441 Protestants were detained (most for quite short periods) and nine sentenced to prison terms in 2012.¹⁰¹ In all the report claims that nearly 5,000 Protestant were ‘persecuted’ in some way – most of whom were members of churches closed down by the local authorities.¹⁰² As other commentators on Christianity in China such Mike Falkenstine¹⁰³ and Brent Fulton¹⁰⁴ have pointed out, although ChinaAid claims their figures indicate a ‘serious comprehensive escalation of government persecution’¹⁰⁵, 5000 Christians alleged to have suffered some type of persecution out of perhaps 80 million Chinese Christians, is a very small percentage – only 0.00625% of all Protestants in China.¹⁰⁶ As Fulton further points out, of the nearly 5,000 Christians reported by China Aid to have suffered persecution in 2012, more than two-thirds were involved in cases where the Christians were either engaged in activity which the government perceived as a threat, or they ran afoul of the economic or political interests of corrupt local leaders.¹⁰⁷ (see also [Sec. 14. Which Christians are subject to government pressure?](#))

Members of unregistered Protestant groups that the government arbitrarily deems ‘evil cults’ were the most vulnerable to detention and harassment.¹⁰⁸ Such a designation by the government strictly prohibits that group. The government has banned at least 18 Protestant groups with adherents in multiple provinces, as well as many more congregations and movements that are

¹⁰⁰ This Christian group was founded by Bob Fu in 2002 ‘to serve the persecuted church and advance religious freedom in China.’

¹⁰¹ China Aid Association 2013, *2012 Annual Report: Chinese Government Persecution of Christians & Churches in Mainland China: January – December 2012*, February, p.9

<<http://www.chinaaid.org/p/chinaaid-annual-reports.html>> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹⁰² China Aid Association 2013, *2012 Annual Report: Chinese Government Persecution of Christians & Churches in Mainland China: January – December 2012*, February, pp.9-28 <<http://www.chinaaid.org/p/chinaaid-annual-reports.html>> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹⁰³ Founder and CEO of China Resource Center ‘a Christian organization that exists to serve the rapid growth and development of the Church in China through rural Bible Distribution Events, Church Building and Theological Training. <<http://www.chinaresourcecenter.org/about/>> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹⁰⁴ The editor of the ChinaSource website ‘a trusted resource for the Christian community providing critical knowledge on serving the Chinese church and society’ <<http://www.chsource.org/en/about-us/the-chinasource-story>> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹⁰⁵ China Aid Association 2013, *2012 Annual Report: Chinese Government Persecution of Christians & Churches in Mainland China: January – December 2012*, February, p.3 <<http://www.chinaaid.org/p/chinaaid-annual-reports.html>> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹⁰⁶ See Falkenstine, Mike 2013, ‘Eradicate Chinese House Churches?’ China Resource Center, 25 February <<http://www.chinaresourcecenter.org/truth/>> Accessed 18 March 2013 and Fulton, Brent 2013, ‘Is China Persecuting More Christians for their Faith?’, ChinaSource website, 22 February <<http://www.chsource.org/en/blog/item/266-is-china-persecuting-more-christians-for-their-faith>> Accessed 18 March 2013. Please note that Falkenstine’s maths is faulty and he included too many zeros – the figure of 0.00625% is correct.

¹⁰⁷ Fulton, Brent 2013, ‘Is China Persecuting More Christians for their Faith?’, ChinaSource website, 22 February <<http://www.chsource.org/en/blog/item/266-is-china-persecuting-more-christians-for-their-faith>> Accessed 18 March 2013.

¹⁰⁸ See [Sec.11. ‘Cults, sects and heterodox Protestant groups’](#)

active in only one province.¹⁰⁹ The Chinese government continues to reserve for itself the final right to determine a religious group's theological legitimacy.¹¹⁰

The attitude of the local officials is a crucial factor in the treatment of unregistered Protestants, and this varies across the country.¹¹¹ In some parts of the country local authorities tacitly approve of the activities of unregistered groups and do not interfere with them.¹¹² In some rural areas, unregistered churches hold worship services attended by hundreds. In other areas, local officials punish the same activities by confiscating and destroying property or imprisoning leaders and worshippers.¹¹³ DFAT has noted that authorities in larger and more wealthy cities tended to turn a blind eye to underground churches, while at the same time encouraging them to become part of the mainstream, government-controlled churches.¹¹⁴

Despite restrictions, harassment, arrests, and government oversight the number of Christian adherents continues to grow in China and the government continues to tolerate worship and some charitable activities by approved religious groups.¹¹⁵

The government has denied detaining or arresting anyone solely because of his or her religion. Local authorities often use administrative detention, such as confinement at re-education through labour (RTL) camps, to punish members of unregistered religious groups. The government has also disbarred a number of attorneys who advocated on behalf of religious freedom and imprisoned other religious freedom activists. The family members of some religious leaders and religious freedom activists are also harassed or detained.¹¹⁶

14. Which Christian groups are subject to government pressure?

As noted in the previous section, not all unregistered churches are subject to government pressure. While the registered churches are legal, and organisations which the government has declared 'evil cults' are banned, most Protestant churches exist in a 'grey' area where they are not legal, but neither are they interfered with by the government.¹¹⁷ While groups designated as

¹⁰⁹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012, 'China', *Annual Report 2012*, March, p.147 [http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹¹⁰ US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012, 'China', *Annual Report 2012*, March, p.147 [http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹¹¹ 'Desensitization and Social Reforms: Taking House Churches as an Example' 2009, *Speech by Yu Jianrong at Peking University on December 11, 2008*, China Aid Association website, 31 July <http://www.chinaaid.org/qry/page.taf?id=135&function=detail&sbtblct_uid1=1261&nc=2dd7f4fb0d49d99189a24d054098ffac>. See also [Section 14](#) for more on the role of local officials.

¹¹² US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

¹¹³ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

¹¹⁴ DIAC Country Information Service 2011, *Country Information Report No. 11/15 – CHN11513 Falun Gong Update*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 6 April 2011), 8 April.

¹¹⁵ US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012, 'China', *Annual Report 2012*, March, p.137 [http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹¹⁶ US Department of State 2012, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 – China*, 30 July.

¹¹⁷ Yang, F. 2007, 'The Red, Black and Gray Markets of Religion in China', *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 47, 2007, pp. 92-122.; Fulton, Brent 2010, 'Policy, Implementation, and Shifting Official Perceptions of the

‘evil cults’ are subject to suppression¹¹⁸, the vast majority of unregistered Protestant churches are left alone.¹¹⁹ In a small number of cases however, governments have taken sometimes quite severe actions against particular unregistered churches, as detailed in [the previous section](#).¹²⁰ This section examines the factors which can lead to some churches being targeted by government authorities.

According to Brent Fulton, the editor of the ChinaSource website¹²¹, there are a handful of triggers which greatly increase the likelihood of official action against a particular Protestant church group. These are:

- Foreign involvement (real or perceived) in religious activities, such as the presence of foreign personnel or foreign funds, which suggests to Chinese officials that these activities are being engineered or at least supported from abroad.
- Whether the Chinese group or individual in question is perceived as having political motives. Criticising the government, taking an activist stance on sensitive issues would likely attract government attention and provoke a negative response.
- The size and scope of the unofficial group and its activities is also a factor. It is generally considered safe to have unofficial “house” meetings of 30-40 people. Beyond that most groups choose to divide and then continue to grow (although there are some unofficial urban groups meeting on a regular basis that number several hundred or more). A group that is part of a larger network, particularly if the network spans several provinces, is also much more likely than an isolated entity to draw official attention.
- Finally, the degree of corruption and greed among local officials will have considerable bearing on how Christians are treated. If Christians are seen as an easy mark for fines—particularly when it is known that the believers in question can attract funds from overseas—then local officials may prey upon them for personal gain.¹²²

Church in China’, *ChinaSource*, 6 January <<http://www.chsource.org/en/articles/government-and-policy/item/2-policy-implementation-and-shifting-official-perceptions-of-the-church-in-china>> Accessed 31 January 2013.

¹¹⁸ See [section 11](#) for details

¹¹⁹ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, pp.84-85 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

¹²⁰ Schak, David 2011, ‘Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.85 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

¹²¹ The website describes itself as ‘**ChinaSource** – a trusted resource for the Christian community providing critical knowledge on serving the Chinese church and society. .. ChinaSource was founded in 1997 as a cooperative effort of the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies, Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association, World Evangelical Fellowship and the Billy Graham Center, who foresaw the need for a non-profit organization devoted to being a catalyst and connector among China-serving leaders.’ <<http://www.chsource.org/en/about-us/the-chinasource-story>> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹²² Fulton, Brent 2010, ‘Policy, Implementation, and Shifting Official Perceptions of the Church in China’, *ChinaSource*, 6 January <<http://www.chsource.org/en/articles/government-and-policy/item/2-policy-implementation-and-shifting-official-perceptions-of-the-church-in-china>> Accessed 31 January 2013

David Schak studied a number of cases of government actions against churches, asking why the authorities cracked down on these particular churches when there are tens of thousands of others against which no actions were taken, and why, even in the cities in which crackdowns occurred, one or a few house churches were harassed but far more were left alone. Schak concluded the following factors can lead to interference in a church's activities:

- Perceived threat. Providing a threat (real or perceived) to social stability and party control can lead the government to interfere in a church's affairs. Schak believes the Chinese government is obsessed with stability and control, and does not generally interfere with unregistered churches unless it perceives a threat.¹²³
- Size. The government does not fear small groupings, but it does not want large organisations of people that might become a force against it.¹²⁴
- Visibility. The authorities also prefers house churches to be inconspicuous. This is partly a matter of congregations remaining small and meeting in someone's home and partly one of avoiding central locations.¹²⁵
- Local officials' attitudes. Schak approaches this issue in a slightly different manner from Fulton (above). According to Schak, it is usually local officials who decide whether to initiate actions against particular churches, and local officials have their own agendas. Schak states 'if a bond of trust exists between local officials and house churches, there is no reason for the authorities to do any more than is absolutely necessary. Where house churches have been operating for several years and are not seen as threats to social stability or may even be regarded as beneficial to it, most local officials will leave them alone.'¹²⁶ Schak does concede that officials do differ from place to place and some officials are more prone than others to view unregistered churches as a threat to stability, or to attack churches for financial or personal reasons.¹²⁷

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom agrees noting that 'the Chinese government continues to view with suspicion religious organisations with extensive foreign

¹²³ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.92 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

¹²⁴ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.92 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

¹²⁵ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.93 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

¹²⁶ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, p.93 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

¹²⁷ Schak, David 2011, 'Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol 40, No 2, pp.94-98 <<http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/418/416>> Accessed 29 January 2013.

ties, whose memberships grow too quickly, whose leadership becomes too popular, or whose religious activities disrupt ethnic or social “harmony.”¹²⁸

15. Situation of Protestants in Fujian Province

Fujian is a province on the south-eastern coast of China, and is the province from which most asylum seekers have come to Australia. They have particularly come from the county of Fuqing City¹²⁹, which is part of the prefectural city of Fuzhou in the north of the province. Although both the province and the county contain relatively large numbers of Protestants, there are few reports of repression of house-church Christians in the province and the county. In the 2006 edition of *China Christians Millions* Lambert also describes religious policy in Fujian as ‘relatively liberal’ however, he also notes the occurrence of ‘occasional crackdowns on house churches’. Lambert provides the following information on the Christian community in Fujian and the treatment house churches:

Fujian has a thriving and rapidly growing Christian community. As a coastal province in the south east, it was one of first to be evangelised from the early 19th century. By 1949 there were about 10,000 Protestants. Official estimates of Protestant Christians in 2004 were 1,179,000 – a twelve-fold growth after fifty-five years of Communism. In early 1999 a TSPM spokesman stated there were 4,000 registered churches and meeting points. In 2000 the TSPM magazine *Tianfeng* revealed there were over 1,200 pastoral workers in Fujian.

Fuzhou, the capital, with its six surrounding rural counties and two smaller municipalities had at least 350,000 Protestants in 2002, meeting in 300 registered churches and 2,000 meeting points. In 2004 Fuqing City had 350,000 believers meeting in 520 churches, according to a Hong Kong Pastor. After Wenzhou, it is the area with the second greatest number of churches in the whole country and has been dubbed ‘China’s Second Jerusalem’. About 26 per cent of the population are Christian. Pingtan, a large island off the coast, has also seen incredible growth, from under 5,000 Christians in 1959 to 60,000 today, divided equally between registered and unregistered congregations. At least 15 per cent of the island’s population are Christians.

The ‘Little Flock’ or ‘Assemblies’ were started by Watchman Nee in the 1930s and are still strong in Fujian, especially in the Fuzhou and Fuqing areas where they number many thousands. Many of them prefer to have no links with the TSPM. In Xiamen at least one third of the believers meet in over 100 independent house churches, according to a knowledgeable Hong Kong Christian. The ‘True Jesus Church’, another indigenous church is also strong in the province with some 70,000 members in total. They are very strong in Putian County, numbering about 20, 000 there. There are about 210, 000 Roman Catholics in Fujian. **In general, the official religious policy has been applied relatively liberally in Fujian, although there have been occasional crackdowns on house churches and ‘underground’ Catholics.**¹³⁰

¹²⁸ US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012, ‘China’, *Annual Report 2012*, March, p.146
[http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹²⁹ Fuqing is a ‘county-level’ city and is largely agricultural with over 90% of its one million population living in rural areas. It has a long history of legal and illegal emigration abroad.

¹³⁰ Lambert, T. 2006, *China’s Christian Millions*, Monarch Books, Oxford, pp.240-1.

Lambert's characterisation of Fujian as a relatively liberal province in relation to religious policy was supported by a Canadian government fact-finding mission to the province in 2000¹³¹ and the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council in 2005.¹³² A 2009 report on the Protestant Church in Fujian Province in a Global Chinese Ministries newsletter confirms that there are large numbers of independent house churches in Fujian. The report also indicates that '[i]n general, local government in Fujian seems fairly tolerant of unregistered believers as it is rare that one reads of cases of persecution of house-church Christians in this province'. It should be noted that one of the sources for this report is the TSPM/CCC.¹³³

Fujian is rarely mentioned in reports on breaches of religious freedom by the US Department of State, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or the various Christian NGOs that report on China. In November 2007 the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) advised that they had no information on the treatment of unregistered churches in Fujian and reported on the difficulty in gaining politically sensitive information in China.¹³⁴ Nevertheless a few actions against local Protestants in Fujian have been reported. These are all the incidents reported since 2006:

- In December 2012, Fujian was mentioned in relation to a nationwide crackdown on members of a Christian sect, the so-called Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning.¹³⁵ This well known sect has been declared an 'evil cult' and its members been subject to waves of arrest since the late 1990s. It has also been condemned by other Christian groups.¹³⁶
- In October 2010, the authorities reportedly took away a worker and sealed three venues used for church gatherings of a church in Lianjiang county in Fujian described as having 'a strong heart for evangelism'.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2000, CHN34099.E 'China: Report of a fact finding mission to Fuzhou by political counsellor, Canadian Embassy, Beijing', 23 March.

¹³² In comments to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005, CHN100387.E – China: Situation of Protestants and treatment by authorities, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong (2001-2005), 1 September.

¹³³ Global Chinese Ministries 2009, 'The Protestant Church in Fujian Province', OMF (Overseas Missionary Fellowship) International website, April
<http://www.omf.org/omf/us/resources_1/newsletters/global_chinese_ministries/gcm_newsletter_2009/global_chinese_ministries_apr_09/the_protestant_church_in_fujian_province> Accessed 2 November 2009. The information is said to be taken from information has been taken from November 2008 *Tianfeng* and *History of Christian Missions in China* by K.S. Latourette. *Tianfeng* is a Protestant magazine published by the TSPM/CCC and can therefore not be taken to be unbiased in relation to house churches.

¹³⁴ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2007, DFAT Report No.07/83 – China: 'Shouters' Christian group and Fujian Province, 28 November.

¹³⁵ Li, Yao 2012, 'Christians warn against cult influence', *China Daily*, 20 December
<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-12/20/content_16033787.htm> Accessed 18 March 2013

¹³⁶ See [Sec.11. 'Cults, sects and heterodox Protestant groups'](#)

¹³⁷ 'Abduction and Building Closures in Fujian' 2010, China Aid website, 19 October
<http://www.chinaaid.org/qry/page.taf?id=105&function=detail&sbtblct_uid1=1582&nc=8e483cd76c2e159254f7a7430ec53b24> Accessed 14 October 2010.

- The Congressional Executive Commission on China annual report for 2009 refers to reports from two localities in Fujian province that the [Local Church](#), which is a banned Protestant group that officials refer to as the ‘Shouters’, was a target for public security forces to ‘strike hard’ against.¹³⁸
- In 2006 police closed unregistered places of worship in various provinces including Fujian, according to the US Department of State.¹³⁹ The 2006 annual report of the China Aid Association also reports on the demolition of house churches in Jilin and Fujian. The report cites an incidence in September 2006 in which a house church was destroyed in Pingtan County, Fujian. A September 2006 report from *Asia News* provides more detailed information on the demolition of the unofficial church in Pingtan County..¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Congressional Executive Commission on China 2009, *Annual Report 2009*, 10 October, pp. 138-139.

¹³⁹ US Department of State 2007, *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, 14 September, Introduction & Section 2.

¹⁴⁰ China Aid Association 2007, *Annual Report on Persecution of Chinese House Churches by Province: From January 2006 to December 2006*, January, pp. 4,12<http://chinaaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/2006_persecution_report.pdf> Accessed 12 June 2007; ‘Church destroyed in Fujian, another to follow shortly’ 2006, *Asia News*, 4 September <<http://www.asianews.it/view.php?l=en&art=7112#>> Accessed 6 December.