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Christianity with Chinese Characteristics: The Origins and Evolution of Adventist Mission in a Chinese Province

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Christianity With Chinese Characteristics: The Origins and Evolution of Adventist Mission in a Chinese Province

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in China is organized as the Chinese Union Mission and forms part of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, which also includes the Japan Union, the Korean Union, and the Mongolian Mission Field. The Chinese Union has 1,150 churches and a membership of 380,295 members according to the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* of 2010. The Chinese Union, in its current form, was first organized in 1949 and reorganized with the East Asian Association to form the Chinese Union Mission in 1999 (2010:239).

The Adventist mission in China is a story that is yet to be fully told. Until recently, Western or Chinese scholars have not been interested in how the church has indigenized or localized to suit Chinese needs. The purpose of this study is to trace the origins and the evolution of Adventism in China, particularly in the southern region of the country, showing how Chinese Adventists indigenized their faith to make it more suitable to the Chinese context without necessarily compromising it. It also highlights the strategy of local Adventists in carrying out their mission within the context of a totalitarian state. Perhaps this study may increase our understanding of how Christian missions can be more successful in totalitarian regimes in other parts of the world.

Early Adventists had little concept of mission and were in fact anti-mission due to their peculiar theology of the Shut Door. George Knight traces four stages in the development of Adventist mission. The first stage, dating from 1844-1850, could be considered anti-mission. The early Adventists had recently come out of the Great Disappointment of the Millerite Movement and were still trying to understand the reason for their

disappointment. Due to their Shut Door views, they believed that probation¹ was closed to most humans and therefore mission outreach was unnecessary (O'Reggio 2008:231).

The second stage, occurring from 1850 to 1874, marked a slight change from the prior position. Adventists now believed that the door of salvation was partially open especially to sinners who had never heard the Great Advent truth. Before the ending of this period, many of the members and leaders were convinced that there was a need for mission but they had no idea about how to do it. By the third stage occurring from 1874 to 1889, Adventists fully embraced the need for mission, but their views were narrowly focused on Protestant Europe and its colonies. The church sent its first official missionary, John Nevins Andrews, to Switzerland in 1874, to what George Knight calls the "heartland of Christian Europe" (O'Reggio 2008:231; Knight 2000:68). In the 1890s, Adventists moved into the fourth and final stage with a mission focus that now encompassed the globe. The decade of the 1890s would be one of the most expansive eras in Christian missions not only for Adventists, but also for many other Protestant groups in North America (O'Reggio 2008:231).

The first Seventh-day Adventist missionary, Abram La Rue, arrived in China in 1887. La Rue was not sent by the church as an official missionary, but went in the latter stages of his life due to a personal concern for the lost in China. The Adventist Church had not fully embraced the concept of global mission, so China was not part of their missionary mandate. In the final decade of the 19th century, the Adventist Church became more global in its mission outreach and eventually, the church mission board sent J. N. Andrews to Hong Kong in 1902. Work did not begin in China proper, however, until 1903 when Ida Thompson opened up a school for girls near Hong Kong. Before long, a young Singaporean of Chinese descent would convert a Chinese Presbyterian pastor and launched the Adventist work in a nearby province.²

Before the Opium War and the resulting Treaty of Nanjing, Westerners were forbidden contact with ordinary Chinese and even then, only within the confines of the treaty ports. Early Protestant missionaries like Walter Medhurst, William Milne, and Elijah Bridgman engaged in "a flank attack on China through the soft underbelly of expatriate Chinese communities in Southeast Asia not under the control of the Chinese government" (Barnett and Fairbank 1985:13). The goal was to convert a number of Chinese overseas who would then return to their homeland and do the work that Westerners were prohibited from doing. The strategy worked splendidly through a young Singaporean Adventist who would later study in China³ (Young 2002:20; Wang 1997:2).

Early Mission History

In 1904, a Seventh-day Adventist, Philip Zheng, went to study at a Church of Christ school in Xinzhu, his father's ancestral home. Zheng's conduct on the Sabbath (Sunday) caught the attention of his classmates who subsequently reported him to their schoolmaster James Guo. The charge of "breaking the Sabbath" was a serious concern to most Christians at the time. Zheng was accused of selling fruit on the Sabbath, thereby breaking the proscription of no work on God's holy day (Young 2002:20). Philip, however, was very well aware of his actions, since school policy strictly forbade work on Sabbath (Li 1993:116).

He, nevertheless, took the risk hoping for a possible witnessing opportunity. He got his wish. Zheng's reply, that he had not broken the Sabbath but had, in fact, observed the true Sabbath (Saturday) shocked his schoolmaster, James Guo. The challenge to his faith was enough to lead Guo to restudy his Bible and eventually change his religious practice. Despite the initial opposition from his immediate family, James Guo quit his job as schoolmaster and was ordained an Adventist minister in 1906 by two Adventist missionaries, who would later serve alongside him in Xinzhu.

James Guo and Philip Zheng worked together to spread the gospel to neighboring villages and even neighboring provinces. In one town in 1907, they even discovered a group of around twenty-five people who had been keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and had followed Adventist health guidelines against smoking and drinking (Young 2002:494).

Guo was a natural evangelist. From 1911-1915, he worked feverously in and around the provincial capital establishing churches. Including his work in Xinzhu, James Guo established at least five churches between Xinzhu and the capital (Xinzhu SDA Church 2004:5). During his later years, he served as education head for the Southern China Adventist Union before passing away in 1936 at the age of seventy-one.

One of James Guo's first stopping points was the town of Ping'an, just up the road from Xinzhu. He had a personal friend and coworker there with whom he was determined to share his new-found truth. Peter Hong, a leader in the Presbyterian Church in his own right, was born in 1866. Around 1880, he became severely ill and was admitted into a Presbyterian hospital. The hand of providence, he would say, saved his life and he forthwith converted and dedicated his life to Christ. Hong was so serious about his faith that he soon brought his older and younger brothers into the church. Church leaders took notice of his efforts and he was ordained an elder. In 1905, however, a severe case of bubonic plague hit Ping'an and Hong's family was faced with a tremendous personal disaster. In less than ten days, Hong's wife, eldest son, and eldest daughter would succumb to the ravages of the plague. Just the previous year, Hong was in Xinzhu

learning the Adventist message. Now with his last breath, Hong's son encouraged his father to accept the Adventist teaching on the Sabbath by saying, "Daddy, it looks like we've been worshiping on the wrong day" (Ping'an SDA Church 2005:9). Expressing grief over his loss and perhaps wondering why such a tragedy would strike him and his family, Hong hesitated in converting to Adventism. Yet, just like a miraculous healing brought him to Christianity in his youth, another miraculous event would influence his decision to join the Adventist Church.

One day, after relieving himself near the foot of the city wall, Hong heard a crash as a large brick fell right where he had been standing. He thought to himself, not only could he have been injured but he might have even died. He was not only fortunate, but took the incident as a warning from God not to hesitate any longer with observing the seventh-day Sabbath.⁴ After his conversion, Hong willingly opened the family paper-dyeing factory as the prime location for an evangelistic series by James Guo and an Adventist missionary. After the meetings, Hong converted the main floor of the factory into a temporary meeting area for the new church. He was such a skilled evangelist that he brought ten families to Adventism, in addition to his own. Many of those who came were originally members of Hong's Presbyterian congregation and some were of influential position. There were doctors, businessmen, teachers, street peddlers, and even a local constable who became converts to Adventism. Many of them, including Hong, donated money to acquire land and build a permanent structure for the church. The commentator in the Ping'an church historical publication wrote that they "valued *the truth* [emphasis Smith's] more than fame, position, wealth or property."⁵ Certainly, this fact was evident in Hong's own life as he would later turn the operation of his business over to another so that he could concentrate completely on God's work. Hong also encouraged his sons to follow in his footsteps. He sent two of them to the Adventist school in Xinzhu, after which both eventually became pastors. One in particular would later serve as a church leader in the regional office in Xinzhu.

The Seventh-day Adventist message spread quickly in the capable hands of the Chinese Adventist pioneers, Philip Zheng, James Guo, and Peter Hong. Having taken part in Sun Yat-sen's *Tongmenghui*, Guo and Zheng were no strangers to iconoclast movements. Zheng ostensibly came to China to start a political insurrection against the Qing and only later enrolled in the Christian school. (Li 1993:115)

The restoration tradition that launched the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States had as much relevance for Chinese Christians who were also deeply convinced of the importance of the seventh-day Sabbath. In the case of both Guo and Hong, both were already leaders in

the Presbyterian Church and in both cases, their efforts to seek the truth were neither praised nor commended by their Presbyterian brethren. In other parts of the world, many non-Adventist denominations had a growing displeasure for the Adventist knack for “sheep stealing.” In China, most of the churches near Xinzhu would eventually sign a cooperation pact that, among other things, combined their educational and health facilities and set comity agreements on where different groups could evangelize. The Adventist Church, in addition to non-denominational groups like the China Inland Missions, did not join these ecumenical efforts due to the church’s divergent approaches to education and even health care.⁶ Seventh-day Adventists have always existed with varying degrees of antagonism with other churches. Even in Xinzhu today, although the church is part of the officially recognized Three-Self organization, they still have a reputation for being distinctively “different” from other churches. The main difference is, of course, the seventh-day Sabbath.

Two Lights on a Hill: Xinzhu and Ping’an

As mentioned earlier, the Adventist work began in Xinzhu with the conversion of Presbyterian pastor James Guo by Philip Zheng, an overseas Chinese. The church was officially established in 1904 and in the following year, the Seventh-day Adventist mission board sent two foreigners to serve as missionaries. From the very beginning, education played an important role in Adventist mission, nor was this uncommon among the other denominations operating in China. In order to develop a talent pool for church leadership, the missionaries and Guo started a school in Xinzhu for Bible training in 1907. In 1908, one of the missionaries, seeing an opportunity to expand the church’s education aims, bought property with his own funds for a middle school. Years later, in 1914, they bought more property that was originally a temple site and converted it into a school for girls (*duan ben nuzi xuexiao*), a school for boys (*dun pin nan xiao*), and a church. Eventually both were combined into one school (*duan ben xiaoxue*). In 1928, this same missionary proceeded to buy another piece of property, where the current Adventist retreat center is located.⁷ The Adventist school was almost closed down by the Nationalist Government when their calls to wave the national flag high and not the Bible were unheeded by school administrators (Li 1993:117). Eventually a compromise was reached where the school accentuated its vocational education and changed its name to *MeiHua Sanyu Yanjiu she*, a more innocuous name suggesting a research institution instead of the religious name it had before. The building, named after one of the missionaries in 1934, still stands today as a centerpiece of a continued Adventist presence in the city. The building however, did not get much use as a school due to interruptions from war and revolution.

During the Pacific theatre of WWII, most of the church's missionary work in Xinzhu either ceased or transferred to more inland parts of the country. At war end in 1946, the school's population stood at around 200. By 1948, that number had doubled to 400 (Xinzhu SDA Church 2004:3). According to the church's official records, both the elementary and middle schools were permanently closed in 1952 due to "special reasons" (*teshu yuanyin*). In 1953, the church ascended to the official Three-Self organization and by 1958 was having joint meetings with other Christians in the city⁸ (Bush 1970:232 and Gao 1996:347).

From 1966-1980, the church building was occupied and all public meetings ceased.

Ping'an's church history is directly related to what happened in Xinzhu. Xinzhu is the mother church (*mutang*), and many of Ping'an's leaders came from there. The first came in 1906, stayed for five years and was later sent to the provincial capital to open up a new mission field. In 1911, a peddler converted by Peter Hong, arrived in Ping'an after attending the Adventist school in Xinzhu. This convert is praised in church materials for his affable qualities and good pastoral skills. He was baptized in 1910, ordained in 1935 and after working in Ping'an moved to a neighboring city to continue the work of the gospel. He personally brought over 100 people to Christ (Ping'an SDA Church 2005:3). Later, a pastor, on his way from a nearby city, would eventually have a great impact on the church in Ping'an. While traveling he had the misfortune of coming across some robbers and lost his wife. While searching for her, he met young Luke Liao selling pottery. Luke would later become the pastor in Ping'an during the Maoist era. Luke was converted to the Adventist faith and worked for the church selling religious books and magazines including the widely distributed *Signs of the Times* (*Shi Zhao Yue Kan*) and Bible Correspondence School material (Ping'an SDA Church 2005:4).⁹

After studying for some time in Hong Kong, Luke returned to Ping'an in 1951 to serve as an evangelist. In 1950, the local church cut all relations with the world Adventist Church. Three years later, they ascended to the Three-Self Patriotic organization. To be truly self-supporting, Luke Liao decided to use part of the church property to run a small farm where he grew grapes and raised sheep. During the Cultural Revolution, some of the church's property was taken over by three different factories. Luke, originally living on the property, was forced to move out with his entire family of ten. Although the times were difficult, he and his assistant, continued to secretly work with the church members in their homes, reminding them to keep a spiritual fire burning. Even during this time, Luke worked with nearby church leaders like Mark Qiu and secretly carried out baptisms in areas far from their homes.¹⁰

Analyzing Church Growth

Despite a large volume of work in China that has either criticized the missionary movement as imperialist or, at best, analyzed it through the lens of Said's *Orientalism*, the Adventist work in this southern Chinese province was totally Chinese initiated (Wang n.d.:98-109). The first missionary to win a convert was an overseas Chinese and this convert, already an ordained pastor, spread the Adventist message outward. The Western missionaries that eventually came played a largely supporting role in the propagation of the message. From the very beginning, the Chinese had ownership and were the largest number of Bible workers. Out of a total of eighty-seven church workers in 1936—missionaries, ministers, and colporteurs—there were only six foreign missionaries for the entire province¹¹ (Shanghai Municipal Archives).

When war came in 1937, the total number of Adventist foreign missionaries nationwide began to plummet from a height of sixty to a low of fourteen in 1945. While the foreigners had the luxury of leaving China, the number of native workers nationwide only dropped slightly from sixty-eight in 1937 to sixty-one in 1945, leaving the work of spreading the gospel largely in their capable hands.¹² By 1936, there were fifty-five Adventist churches in the province and, to the surprise of many, most were able to survive the numerous revolutions of Maoist China.

In the pre-1949 period, the Adventist church experienced unparalleled freedom in spreading its message in and around Xinzhu. The Adventist Church was still very young, however, when it first sent missionaries to China. When the Church arrived in China, it had to compete with other churches that had long been established with converts, schools, and hospitals. Because of its reformist nature, Adventism attracted a number of pre-converted Christians from other denominations to its ranks. Official church records of the time do not distinguish between those who came into the church by profession of faith and those who came in by baptism.¹³ Therefore it is impossible to tell how many non-converted people joined the Adventist Church because of its missionary activities. From Smith's interviews, however, it is safe to say that the church had a general policy of evangelizing pre-converted people. This policy had its limits, of course, since there are far more non-Christians than there are potentially Christian converts to the Adventist message. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, the Adventist Church sought to call people out of Babylon.

One particular question that is revealed by church records regards the exceptional case of the southern Chinese province in question. Church records from 1931-1936, for example, do show that the number of Adventists were greatest in Eastern (*Hua-Dong*)¹⁴ and Southern (*Hua-Nan*)¹⁵ China. The Seventh-day Adventist Church had its main China offices in Shanghai

(*Hua-Dong*) like other denominations and Southern China served as the main trading entrepot for goods coming in and out of the country. As a result, the number of missionaries there would be naturally greater than other parts of China and their potential to reach converts would also be commensurate. Even among Chinese church workers, the number in *Hua-Nan* were generally greater than in *Hua-Dong*. In 1932 there were 241 Chinese workers in *Hua-Nan* and 198 in *Hua-Dong*. In 1936 the numbers also reflected a difference in favor of *Hua-Nan* with 303 and 263 respectively. Among the church's Western missionaries, the differences were also significant with 38 foreign missionaries in *Hua-Nan* and only 21 in *Hua-Dong* for 1936¹⁶ (Shanghai Municipal Archives). These numbers, however, do not provide an answer to the relative question of church growth. Was the church growing especially quickly in this southern Chinese province? The short answer is, no. For *Hua-Nan* as a whole, total church members in 1931 were 2,739 and in *Hua-Dong*, 2,913. The difference is even starker in 1936 with 3,676 members in *Hua-Nan* compared with 4,484 in *Hua-Dong*. The number of baptized members does not correlate with the number of church workers. It appears that although the church grew quickly initially in this province, growth slowed down in the 1931-1936 period. The number of baptisms for that period was only 1,670 in comparison to 3,123 in *Hua-Dong*. What can explain this huge discrepancy? When we look at the province-specific numbers for each region, we also find that the highest numbers were in a neighboring province *not* the province in question. These differences might reflect some internal difficulties that are not explained by the data because by January 1947 both *Hua-Nan* and *Hua-Dong* reflect similar membership numbers at 4,439 and 4,526 respectively. The two regions also continue to reflect the highest number of members for all of China until 1949.

From the available data, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had its largest proportion of members along China's coast, areas long open to foreign trade and missionary activity. These entrepots of foreign trade provided not only an exchange of goods, but also of ideas. It was among these progressive individuals that Adventism found its first converts. However, as the story of James Guo and Peter Hong show, the church was often more successful gaining members in areas previously entered by other missionary agencies, especially among their kinship and business networks. Since Adventism was a reformist movement among American Protestants, it should not be surprising that many of their numbers came from a pre-converted population. These concentrated groups of people established the church in the region and gave it a recognizable face among members of the community. It cannot be stated with certainty that this was exclusively the case with the early Adventist work in China and chances are it was

not. The church's missionary work did not continue in this manner either. Based on unpublished reports, some of the largest Adventist churches in China today are in places like Henan and Hebei where missionary activity was less robust and traditional Chinese religious practices often prevailed in the pre-communist period. Today these provinces in China's interior offer some of the strongest indicators of the growth of Christianity.

The Beginning of the Communist Era

In 1950, the Seventh-day Adventist Church met in Hong Kong and decided to turn all leadership positions in church administration, publishing, schools, and hospitals over to the Chinese (Bush 1970:40). The church had already faced restrictions on its activities during the previous decade when church property was destroyed by war and missionary activity was limited to a person-person basis. Many Adventists were, undoubtedly, already driven underground during this period.¹⁷ The Church's policy to relinquish all foreign control into the hands of the Chinese probably resulted from an awareness of the Communist Party's anti-imperialist rhetoric and its intention to bring all denominations under one governing body: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. It was politically unsafe to be a Christian in China although the party continued to tout religious freedoms. An oft quoted document from Taiyuan, Shanxi province states, that Seventh-day Adventists "shall abolish their daily morning prayers, and they shall work on the Sabbath. Their tithing system for the support of the clergy shall be abolished" (Gao 1996:347). Presenting a completely different image to foreigners, a Chinese government representative would later tell visitors from the Australian Free Church in 1959 that Seventh-day Adventists were allowed to hold services on Saturday and that denominational structures still functioned (Bush 1970:232). This could not be further from the truth, as the Taiyuan document clearly shows. In the southern Chinese province where this study is based, things were not much different.

To gain some understanding about what life was like for Chinese Christians under Mao, it was necessary to interview older members of the church since all church and available official documentation glosses over this period with essentially no detail. The omission of pertinent information in the written record masks a critical moment in the development of Christianity in China. The senior members of the church who were interviewed were all born into Christian families before 1949; all of them nearly left their faith behind during the height of Maoist reeducation campaigns, yet that faith did not die but was revitalized and continues into the present day. One quintessential example of this faith born out of a Maoist prison is John Chen, a pseudonym, now the senior pastor at the Xinzhu church.

John Chen was born into a Presbyterian family. His father was trained

as a doctor in a missionary school and as a result formed a close relationship with many of the foreign missionaries who often visited the Chen family home. Chen, himself, attended Christian schools for his entire education although he was never officially trained as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. He eventually chose to follow the Adventist Church because of their focus on the critical issues of the Bible, instead of the admittedly secular topics that were being taught in many Protestant schools.¹⁸ Chen's decision was also strengthened by no small effort on the part of his elder brother to bring their entire family to the message he had just acquired. His entire family's eventual conversion underscores the effectiveness of kinship ties in bringing about conversions. John was twenty years old when he joined the Adventist Church in his hometown, near Xinzhu. His first responsibility in his new found church was school master in Xinzhu. He held that position from late 1948 to early 1950 when the school was closed indefinitely by the new communist government. Shortly thereafter, the world Adventist Church was forced to sever all ties with the Chinese church.

When the Adventist Church governing body decided to hand over leadership in the Chinese church to Chinese nationals, they also severed all financial ties with local churches and church institutions in China. As a school master, John Chen received a salary from the school's operating funds, money which dried up in 1950. As a result, he felt compelled to leave his position, before the school was mandatorily closed by the government. Although the decision made financial sense, Chen laments that he left God's work for such a long time. For almost ten years, starting from 1951, John Chen did not attend any church meetings or communicate with any church member (Chen 2006). Instead, he taught in a government run school for the next seven years until the accusations of the Cultural Revolution reached his doorstep and he was sent to a labor camp for the remaining three years. Although the government categorized him as belonging to the despised landlord class, of being a running dog of American imperialism, and of being a rightist, Chen insisted that his crimes were no more than simply being a Christian. To their accusations, he would often respond, "I know Christianity came from the West, but I only believe in the Lord, not in America."

John Chen's comments reflect a critical dilemma for most Christians of his generation. In their eyes, religion was a personal conviction, devoid of any imperialist connections. Furthermore, for people like John Chen, born into a Christian family as a third generation believer, Christianity had familial ties that would outlast government pressures to sever them. At 90 years old (in 2006), John Chen has lived to see the perpetuation of his family's faith down to a fourth, fifth, and even sixth generation of be-

lievers. How did this faith stay alive amidst pressures to conform to new Communist doctrine and dogma? For John Chen, his faith suffered greatly during this period when he no longer worked for the church as a teacher (in fact he could not since all Christian schools were closed) and did not awaken until after much suffering that caused his wife to be hospitalized and his son to almost lose his life. Prison had its own refining fire.

Prison has a way of refining Christians and building their faith. It was no different for John Chen who rejoices in the peace he experienced throughout that time. While in jail, he did not stop from sharing the gospel with his cellmates. More importantly, John did not want to be disobedient to the Lord's calling on his life any longer, so he devoted himself to sharing the message, even in such a forbidding place. It was in prison that John understood what it meant to suffer for Christ and he was able to see his present sufferings in light of a greater ecclesiastical cause.¹⁹ His cause was no longer to serve himself and his immediate family but he began to recognize that he had a greater responsibility to Christ, spreading his message, and to the Chinese Christian church in particular. Under circumstances like these, Chinese Christians began to develop their own consciousness separate from party and state.

After his release from prison, Chen was encouraged in his new found conviction by visits from nearby pastors. They asked him if he was willing to come out of hiding and hold secret meetings with local Christians. John laughs at the irony of the time that he finally responded to the Lord's calling. There was probably no more dangerous time to spread the gospel than during the Cultural Revolution, but it was during this time that Chinese Christians really saw what their faith was worth. John Chen and his assistant found Christians, not necessarily Adventists, around Xinzhu who were willing to meet together as a group. Three months into their meetings, the government became aware of their activities and they were pressured to break up into smaller groups to avoid further detection. Chen does not know exactly how many people eventually joined the meetings but they grew with obviously no public advertisement. The first meeting had four people, followed by seven and then eleven the week after that. At any location, there may have been 20-30 people meeting secretly. Those who were bold enough to hold secret meetings did so with a clear understanding that they were keeping the fire of faith burning for many more that feared reprisal. For John Chen, he may have originally run away from his faith by working for a government school but he embraced it again by doing underground work during the Cultural Revolution.

John Chen was not the only one doing secret work during the Cultural Revolution. A few hours from Xinzhu, Mark Qiu was also busy spreading the Adventist message as he hid from the government, moving from

place to place in the countryside. Many of the groups that he started then are active churches today. Unlike John Chen, Qiu was an Adventist from a very young age and even attended the Adventist school in Xinzhu. After the Communist Party came to power, Qiu worked as a government cadre from 1955-66. Two years later he was imprisoned for his Christian beliefs but the imprisonment did not last more than a few months. After he was released, Qiu was advised by his family and friends to go out into the countryside where his movements could be less closely followed. Over a period of time, Mark traveled to no less than six towns and cities, drawing adherents wherever he went (Qiu 2006). His work was so effective that while interviewing him, two people whose parents were converted by his itinerant work testified of his work. Again, similar to John Chen, Mark's work was mostly among initially non-Adventist populations whom he converted sharing messages with them about the Sabbath, healthful living, and the coming of the Lord. In either case, their lives represent the struggle that many Christians faced living under Mao's China, a struggle that caused them to group together in tight-knit bonds of local Christians, despite prior denominational affiliation. Although Adventists continue to maintain their uniqueness in China, this post-denominational quality of the Chinese church had its beginnings here, in the hearts of the people who no longer banded together on strictly theological grounds but on the more pressing issue of the suffering they faced brought on by Mao's political campaigns.

Due to the still closed nature of public discussion about the Cultural Revolution in China and the tenuous relationship that many Christians still have with state authorities, it would be imprudent to go into explicit detail about the work of John Chen and Mark Qiu. Nevertheless, it is certain that what they did during the Cultural Revolution was not uncommon. Their secret work of spreading the gospel created a generation of Christians in China who were poised to spread the gospel even further once the doors were open to them. Many of them are active today in official and unofficial house churches, in Bible training camps, and in clandestine seminaries. Some may even be involved in the numerous heterodox groups that dot China's religious landscape. But how do you switch from a system that is absolutely repressive towards religious freedom to a system that offers relative freedom and the space for heterodox groups to flourish? How did the Chinese Communist Party rationalize this 180 degree turn and how have Christians taken advantage of this new freedom?

Gaige (Reform)

Notice a 1980 comment by Chinese Christian leader, Bishop Ding Guangxun, who called the Cultural Revolution a "mistake," an aberration

for an otherwise benevolent government²⁰ (Chinese Government 1997). The Gang of Four cannot represent the actions of the Party because they took over the Party apparatus and the Party ceased to function as it was meant to. It is not surprising then that organized religion suffered under such circumstances, according to Ding. In the reform era, however, the Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping moved away from revolutionary politics and toward a less volatile system of religious representation. Ensuring that the law was carried out on the ground was not easy in a country that had just experienced lawlessness for ten years or more. In the reform era, the onus was often laid on Christians to see that government policies were carried out. No two circumstances were the same and the examples of Xinzhu and Ping'an provide a useful element of analysis. Ping'an, in particular, is an interesting example of how new economic policies affected the rebirth of a church.

As previously mentioned, Adventist evangelist Luke Liao of Ping'an, after being converted to the Adventist faith, went to Hong Kong in 1947 for a year's worth of training in evangelistic work. He returned to Ping'an in 1951 as the local evangelist and served the church in nurturing members during the closed days of the Cultural Revolution. Following new government policies after Mao's death, Liao requested permission to open up a, so called, "Adventist Arts and Crafts Factory" (Ping'an SDA Church 2005:7). The money for this factory came from church members, bank loans, foreign loans, and even from the local *liang-hui* (local branch of the Three Self Movement and the China Christian Council). The factory was quite successful in that the products were featured in a Guangzhou trade fair and earned over one million RMB per annum. Much of the money was used to regain original church property. By 1989, the factory money was also used to build a few buildings on site, mostly dormitories, but the environment did not give the sense that this was really a church.²¹ Eventually, in 1991, the decision was made to move the factory to a nearby town. Liao's intention in opening up the factory was to provide work for church members who might have difficulty with jobs that required them to work on Saturday, the Sabbath. It is not clear how many church members the factory eventually employed but the money earned did satisfy an equally important goal of regaining commandeered land.

In Xinzhu, the circumstances for getting back church property involved a lot more work with the local Three-Self organization. In the Cultural Revolution, people began living in the church building so that when reforms began, Adventists had no church property to return to. Initially, the local church had to ask for permission to worship on Saturday which was granted to them on condition that they worship in the same building as other Protestants. Church leadership accepted this compromise until

they were able to properly position themselves with the authorities. In Xinzhu, this meant gaining a seat at the local council of Christian churches and open access to relevant government officials. Previously, this council seat was filled by Barnabas Xu, a pseudonym. Xu, had joined the Xinzhu congregation from a Northern Province shortly after the communist victory. Perhaps, because of his outsider status, Xu was never willing to push the local government on major issues though he served consistently, representing the church throughout the Maoist era. After John Chen came out of hiding, he replaced Barnabas Xu in representing the Adventist Church at the local *liang-hui*. In contrast to Barnabas Xu, John Chen has an outspoken and persuasive personality.

When John Chen gained a position in the heritage department at the local *liang-hui*, an argument arose about old church property (including schools) in the city. No one mentioned the former Adventist school and John quickly spoke up, defending his church. The school built by the missionaries was eventually added to their list of protected sites. After this incident, John began to push the authorities to return usage of the original church site to the Adventists. He said he asked a very simple question, "The church is still there, why can't you return it to us?" The official responded, "Don't you know this is a Marxist country!? We are trying to decrease the number of churches not increase them!" (Chen 2006). Chen was not dismayed and with the help of others was able to convince this recalcitrant official to change his mind. Chen's primary argument at this stage hinged on the travel distance that older church members had to overcome. In the event of storms that frequently hit Southern China, many of them would not be able to get to church. In June 1989, the local religion bureau ratified Chen's request (Xinzhu SDA Church 2006:10).

Identity Crisis: To Be or Not to Be "Patriotic"²²

From the examples in Xinzhu and Ping'an, it is clear, that for Seventh-day Adventists and other religious groups in China, a relationship with the government is necessary for the group's *legal* survival. There are groups that exist *illegally* and hence, marginalize themselves in matters of religion, but for groups like the Adventist Church, the focus is not on antagonism with the state but harmony, not sectarianism but truly existing as a bona-fide Chinese Christian church. Lawson, in his study on worldwide Adventism, comments that "the trajectories of mission churches not controlled by home religious bodies are far more responsive to differing local circumstances" (Lawson 1998:652-672). Lawson's argument is that, by and large, Seventh-day Adventism is a top down organization and its mission churches *are* controlled by the church governing body. In China, however, no church is allowed to be *officially* connected with any foreign

organization although *unofficial* contacts do exist. As a result, churches are free to adjust standard church practice to fit with local conditions. Chinese Adventists, for example, follow the standard Chinese practice of starting church at 8 a.m. with the sermon finishing at 10:40 a.m. In America, the sermon does not start until 11:30 a.m.²³ Although it is a simple example of where Chinese Adventists try to fit their surroundings, it shows the church's willingness to conform to the accepted practice in China. Adventists have conformed to Chinese conditions in other areas as discussed below. Of particular importance to church doctrine is the sticky issue of training pastors. Here, as in other areas, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in China prefers to cooperate with the state and trains its pastors in official, government approved, seminaries. By doing so, they break away from Lawson's understanding of how Adventist churches commonly operate overseas yet still operate within the church-sect theory.

Lawson, citing Stark and Bainbridge (1985), defines the church-sect theory as a "tool to measure a single summary variable, the 'state of tension' between a religious group and 'its surrounding sociocultural environment'" (Lawson 1998:654). This tension is marked by three elements: difference, antagonism, and separation. Because Adventists have normalized their relationship with the state, their potential level of antagonism decreases substantially as do other indicators of sectarianism. Groups that do fit the sectarian division in China are openly anti-government and make little effort to register their organization. These are the *xiejiao*, Christian cults or perhaps underground churches, which are often reported in the Western media.²⁴ These groups choose not to join the TSPM, believing that it is a tool of the Party and not representative of true Christianity. The true head of the church, they say, is Jesus Christ, not the Chinese Communist Party. In the rural areas in which they mostly operate, their competition with the official church and other sects for converts often leads to violence, just the sort of public bedlam the Party wants to avoid (Kahn 2004). Although Adventists have generally ascended to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, there are a number of Adventist groups in Southern China who did not follow the masses and join the official organization (Chen 2006). In one particular town, two sons of an old Adventist pastor diverged in their thinking regarding the role of the government in church affairs. One ended up joining a schism in the Adventist Church from a nearby province. Both of their churches coexist today in the same town, with one registered and the other not²⁵ (Xinzhu church member 2006).

Since Adventists have largely sought to work with the state, they have run into a number of areas where the state's policies do not line up with what they want to accomplish. The research revealed that the government functionaries in this particular Southern Chinese province are far more

pliable than, certainly, anywhere in Northern China, but there is an overall focus in this province on meeting local needs rather than distant central policies. Particularly when Christians are a large percentage of the population, as they are in some southern Chinese cities, the local government can be easily convinced to acquiesce to their demands. Having said that, the Christians that were studied were not given everything they asked for on a silver platter. They often have to push and cajole the local government, sometimes for a few years, before they get what they want. Some areas of conflict between church and state in China touch very much on the issue of Adventist identity amidst a larger post-denominational movement by the Chinese government.

Pastoral Training

Arguably the most serious challenge facing the Church in China today is the lack of trained pastoral staff. China only has several thousand pastors to serve a conservative estimate of 17 million Protestant Christians. Beijing's Yanjing Seminary, for example, only has 87 students. These students come from ten provinces and municipalities that the Yanjing Seminary serves: Beijing and Tianjin municipalities, Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces, and Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Xinjiang autonomous region. It is a shockingly small number for such a large and densely populated area. This low number, however, is largely due to a shortage of qualified teachers (the seminary only has ten on the books who are often studying overseas) and limited funds and space. Tuition is no longer a problem, having recently been subsidized by a 750,000 yuan government grant but the school still relies on a majority of its funding from its regional churches and the generosity of outside donors (Ni 2006:28, 29). With only about twenty students graduating each year, the seminary is not able to supply enough pastors for the ten province-level wide area that it covers. In contrast, the seminary in Xinzhu's provincial seat has over 200 students in its theology program per graduating class. They were also the first provincial seminaries to open after the Cultural Revolution in 1983. The contrast with the Beijing seminary could not be starker. The province's wealth accounts for this difference, as does the relative freedom existing in the south.

On the local level, when the church in Xinzhu decided to train a new generation of pastors, they decided to send a young male and female student to the provincial seminary in 1985 and 1987 respectively. Both returned to serve the local church and were even followed by the transfer of another recent seminary graduate from the provincial capital. The church leadership could have chosen to train their potential pastors through unofficial channels but that would certainly have compromised their posi-

tion with the government. As of now, Xinzhu has three ordained pastors (male), *mushi*, and two evangelists (female), *chuandao* (Xinzhu SDA Church 2004:13).

The Chinese Adventist Church seems to follow conservative Adventist practice on the ordination of women. The female *chuandao*, seminary trained, are allowed to preach but they cannot baptize, perform the communion service, or any other traditional rite of the church (Zhou 2006). Other than those offices, the church also has a deacon/deaconess board who are democratically elected from the membership. Unlike the practice in America, the board members serve for an extended period of time, as do the pastors and the *chuandao*. There is not a lot of moving pastors from church to church as is common in America. By and large, the Xinzhu church has more pastoral and church staff than any Adventist church in the region. They developed this contingent of trained professionals early in China's reform period and now their pastors are helping with evangelistic work across the region.

Cross-town Adventist Community

At the beginning of the communist era, twenty-six towns or villages across the province had churches. The existence of so many churches across the province shows the relative speed at which the message spread. Today, there are even more, testifying to the number that were started in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. It is not surprising today that many of these churches often want to gather together for spiritual enrichment, fellowship, and important celebrations. The rules governing such meetings are in the Chinese government document, "Regulations on Religious Affairs," published in 2005. Article 22 specifically deals with this issue by requiring an application if the religious gathering is large scale and outside the normal registered meeting area. It is not clear how often this particular article is invoked or how many times religious groups have their applications rejected. It may very well be that the application process serves as a barrier to most groups who may just have their meetings secretly. For the Xinzhu church community, it is difficult to determine if any of their activities with churches from other cities would fall under Article 22's guidelines. Perhaps they are protected by the fact they have not reached the level of the provisions in Article 40 which speak about religious activities disrupting public order. So far Adventist gatherings in this province, and afar, have been small and not in the thousands that might be common at an American regional Adventist camp meeting. In effect, these provisions restrict the Chinese Adventist church from forming traditional regional solidary bonds. By Chinese law, Adventists (and all groups) are not allowed to organize into anything that is above the local-church administrative level.

Religious Infrastructure

Another significant issue for most churches in China is space. Simply put, there are not enough public places of worship to meet the growing demand. Almost all churches in China operate at full capacity with the extra room they have for overcrowding also full with people watching on closed-circuit TV. According to common convention, it is more common to see new churches being built in the countryside than in cities, and it is common to see churches as one drives on the highway in this Southern province. Many of the churches look quite new and their red crosses are clearly evident from a distance. For a city, what has happened to the Adventist Church in Xinzhu breaks with what is common in other regions. For the past few years, city planners planned a large commercial-residential development next to the Xinzhu church. Pursuant to Article 33 of the “Regulations on Religious Affairs,” developers have to get agreement from both parties before they can proceed with any demolishing of religious property and they must properly compensate the religious organization for its losses. The Xinzhu developer’s project actually included the land that the church sits on but for the past three years the church leadership refused all their offers and did not move the church. Perhaps they were waiting for the right moment, because the government has recently agreed to not only give the Xinzhu congregation a new building but also more land than they had before. Most importantly, the government has promised to pay all expenses (Fang 2006). This, however, is only one side of the story.

From one of the interviews with John Chen, I learned that the district government and the developers had plans to use the church’s land without going through the proper channels. They approached the younger pastors in the church with their plan and promise to build a new church but when they brought the issue before Chen, he responded adamantly “No! This church belongs to God. It is not for me to sign it away.” The interview with Chen revealed many loopholes in a system that leaves some Chinese powerless. In this case, the district government had not cleared their development plans with the city—odd that city officials would not notice an entire area being razed—nor had the Christian council been notified of the plans to bulldoze a church. Chen was exasperated when he saw the *liang-hui* official at the meeting and shouted, “Aren’t you suppose to represent us?” At the end of the meeting, Chen used the power of Article 33 to delay any plans the developers and district planners had and he insisted that the matter be brought before the senior city officials. Unlike other organizations that have lost their property without much compensation there are faint signs that the Xinzhu congregation will eventually get a new building. They have blueprints hanging in one of the church of-

fices and church pastors have seen the new property. Nevertheless, paraphrasing John Chen, government officials are not Christian and cannot be relied on to represent Christian interests. Furthermore, without a culture where law rules in China and economic gain is the prime directive, government and real estate developers have *carte blanche* authority to do as they please.

Conversion and Evangelism

Although Articles 1 and 2 suggest that public evangelism in China is illegal,²⁶ the Christian message is still being spread. Most Chinese conversion tactics focus on personal relationships and not big evangelistic events that are common in America. The Chinese church grows by the practice of *yige dai yige*, one brings one, and flourishes on many people's openness in sharing what they believe. In Xinzhu, this practice resulted in the conversion of a number of Tibetan workers. Why people convert to Christianity in China could be the subject of another paper but certainly for the Tibetans, one of the most basic needs met was community (Hunter and Chan 1993:173, 232-235). As migrant workers in a Han commercial city, the Tibetans had very few people they could rely on. When they were befriended by a church member at their shop, they found the church welcoming and supportive of them as they struggled to make a living so far away from home. Around four or five Tibetans were eventually baptized and the Xinzhu congregation assisted them with starting up a new congregation back home.

Church members also continue to rely on personal relationships to evangelize locals. At a recent baptism, most of the candidates were friends or family members of current church members. Because Xinzhu is a relatively small church, the number of candidates, only ten, reflects their size and the relative small share of the Christian pie that Adventists can garner. Nevertheless, the church is unique in China because of its strong denominational identification. When Chinese choose to be baptized into the Adventist Church, they are acutely aware of the difference between Adventists and the mainline Christian church, namely over the Sabbath. Some of those who come to the Xinzhu church inquiring about the Sabbath do not come back because they are scared away by reports from mainline Christians about Adventist's supposed sectarian nature. This is despite the fact that Seventh-day Adventists have been represented at the local *liang-hui* since the 1980s.

At the time of writing, statistics for mainline churches were unavailable, nevertheless, a pastor at the Xinzhu church was able to provide some statistics regarding its membership. After baptism, 20% do not come to church often, 60% come often, and 20% do not come. To put these percent-

ages in perspective, the church membership record stands at about 420 persons (Zhou 2006). The pastor went on to describe a number of reasons why people might enjoy or not enjoy coming to church. They are like those found in any congregation worldwide with atmosphere, friendliness, and the preaching quality being the top three. Before people are baptized however, they are subject to a three-month Bible-training program, shortened from an initial six-month program. Throughout the calendar year, there are also Bible seminars and in-house meetings that members can attend.

Building Local-Adventism

From the areas of pastoral training and fostering Adventist identity to building religious infrastructure, Adventists have taken advantage of relative gaps in the Chinese state's seemingly pervasive control mechanism. Particularly in Southern China, these potential gaps combine with the local government's willingness to tacitly support the interest of religious groups, largely because their economic growth allows them to detract the center's eyes from controversial topics like religion. In this scenario, the Chinese saying holds true, *Zheng yi zhi yan, bi yi zhi yan*—loosely translated as see no evil, hear no evil. As long as there is no major catastrophe on the horizon, the Chinese central government is likely to look blindly at things happening far from Beijing. Another Chinese saying, *shan gao huangdi yuan*—the mountains are high and the emperor is far away or *shang you zhengce, xia you duice*—there may be a policy from above but those below have a way around it, also helps to explain the thinking of everyday Chinese when it comes to political issues.²⁷ Chinese know that certain activities are more permissible the further away they are from the center of political power. Furthermore, Adventists in particular, have learned to push officials in areas critical to church operation.

When the time came to train new pastors, the church leadership did not worry about the fact that they had no church building and were probably on shaky ground with the local *liang-hui*. More importantly, they were also forced to forgo the standard Adventist practice of training pastors at Adventist schools. Since there are no Adventist seminaries in China, the church had little option. They could have chosen to train their pastors in more covert ways but by choosing to send their candidates to the official provincial seminary, Xinzhu Adventists commended themselves in the eyes of religious authorities and guaranteed themselves more cards to play with in the future. The recent challenge over a new church, however, is evidence of how difficult it can be to assure religious rights in China. A cooperative and not openly antagonistic relationship between the two sides is critical to ensure that the process of developing a rights culture in China moves forward. In this aspect, the Seventh-day Adventist Church

in Xinzhu has moved clearly down the line from sect to church by normalizing relationships with the governing authorities. The church follows government regulations out of principle, but also because it is the only way to operate without harassment in China.

Seventh-day Adventists, by nature of their reformist background, try to keep a clear line of separation between themselves and other Christian churches. For this reason, Adventist group identity is stronger than it might be in mainline denominations and the Church is prone to accusations because of its separatist stance. Where the Chinese government is concerned, province-wide or cross-province meetings might be misinterpreted as revolutionary or illegal for attempting to form a non-registered assembly. When Adventists meet in this regard, they are very careful about the size and location of their meeting. Adventists try to foster group identity by meeting regularly with sister churches across the region. The purpose is simply to encourage an Adventist identity, without anti-government or revolutionary intention.

To get a broader perspective, we should consider the broader context of religion in China and the case of Adventist Christians specifically. Adventists' missions are, of course, part of the great era of Protestant missionary work in China followed by the instantaneous closure of that work with the ascendancy of the Chinese Communist Party to power in 1949. Missionary work in China, particularly for Mainland Chinese scholars, has often been studied under the rubric of imperialism or post-colonialism discourse (Wang 2002/2003). Until recently, Western scholars—to say little of Chinese scholars—have not been interested in the Chinese characteristics of the church or more specifically, how the church has *indigenized* or *localized* to suit Chinese needs (Lee 2005; Yamamoto 2000). For Chinese scholars, the reasons have been largely political since many of China's indigenous Christian groups did not support the Party's religious policy. Therefore, research on them is still strictly forbidden in the People's Republic.²⁸

Seventh-day Adventists, inhabit a slightly different spectrum. Launching off in a coastal province with trade links spanning hundreds of years before the twentieth century, Adventists entered a region that was less hostile to foreign presence and had an established history of religious exchange²⁹ (Dunch 2001:2-4). Islam, brought by Muslim traders, had been in the area since the Tang dynasty leaving numerous mosques and tombstones as evidence (Lin and Xie 1997). This history of cross-cultural interaction and international trade set the stage for the arrival of Philip Zheng, as mentioned earlier. The Adventist work in Xinzhu, beginning with Zheng, was not a planned, concerted effort by the church mission board in the United States. In fact, Zheng went to China under completely different auspices and as a matter of course, converted his school master, James

Guo.³⁰ Although Guo was more intentional in sharing his new found faith, he also relied on preexisting channels and relationships, thereby rooting the movement with local people and local conditions.³¹ By doing so, he brought the Adventist Church in line with the indigenizing, or localizing movements occurring in China at the time.

In conversation with the broader scholarly literature, Adventist missions in Xinzhu and Ping'an provide a window into these localizing trends and explore under what circumstances church and state can co-exist peacefully. China has its own concept of separation of church and state. In China, the church is obliged not to do anything that interferes with the state but the state is free to manage the church as it sees fit. In this way, the church stays *separate* from the state (Fuzeng 2003). Interfering with the state's ability to govern includes everything from educating the masses in a manner the state does not approve of or forming relationships with international forces that might threaten the state's existence. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church in China that means an official relationship with the world church organization is impossible and traditional Adventist institutions like schools and hospitals cannot be managed under church auspices. This, however, does not prevent private individuals or corporations from opening a school or hospital. Ownership must simply not be in the church's hands. Throughout the Adventist Church's history in China, they have recognized the rules and largely chosen to adhere to them rather than assuming an antagonistic stance against the state. By taking a stance that harmonizes with the state's policy, Adventism has been able to survive as a distinct entity in China where most denominations have been relegated to the construct of post-denominationalism³² (*Tianfeng* 2006:283).

The Adventist churches discussed here are not only acutely aware of their Adventist character (mainly signified by the seventh-day Sabbath) but are, surprisingly, also in touch with the sentiments that move through the larger world church.³³ Furthermore, stressing the local quality of the state-church relationship, Adventists in this region have retained singular control of their own church buildings, which is not common in other parts of China.³⁴ Coupled with admonitions against eating pork, smoking, drinking, and worldly entertainment, Chinese Adventists share many characteristics with their Christian brothers and sisters but also some distinct differences. Overall, their identity is not defined by government directive but instead by faith, faith not grounded in institutions but in the Bible. Their identity is grounded with a sense of history that has not forgotten how far the church has come, particularly under the leadership of those who knew the importance of standing up for what they believed in. In short, the Adventist experience in Southern China has often been

one of compliance with the government and sometimes passive resistance as they negotiate their identities and roles in a society where faith and patriotism are often *not* separate entities. Adventists, like other Christians, accept the representation of the Party but are not idle in finding ways to continue their mission of spreading God's message of redemption to the four corners of the globe. The Seventh-day Adventist Church in China, though started by foreigners, has taken on distinctive *Chinese characteristics* as they adapt to changing patterns of state behavior.

They have done this through a process of localizing Christianity and by this I mean, the process by which a foreign religion becomes accepted by the people and legal by the state bureaucracy (Menegon 2002:13-18; Lee 2005:31-46; Lee 2003:68-95). For Protestant Christianity, that process began with the treaties following the Opium War granting rights to missionaries and now rests at its current state where official, state supported Christianity is legalized and protected, without its foreign accoutrements. Our discussion begins about mid-range, after the Boxer Uprising, when many in China, including some Christians began to strive for independence from foreign involvement in Chinese affairs. It was at this time that many of China's *indigenous* churches began and started developing home-grown theologies and evangelizing tools for a truly *Chinese church*. As has been explained, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a young church when it entered China and probably lacked much of this forethought in their mission planning. However, independent missionaries chose not to wait for church initiative when spreading the gospel and thrust the Chinese mission upon themselves. When these missionaries arrived in their respective locals, they worked within established patterns of faith transference and relied on local people by partnering with them in the work of spreading the gospel. *Localization* suggests the use of local elements to transfer the message to local ears. Perhaps it was out of necessity for lack of numbers, but the Adventist Church had a strong tradition of local converts continuing the work of spreading the gospel, with or without missionary presence. However, there is still another element to localization that resonates with earlier academic discussions on local religious traditions and the orthodox imperial system. Let us consider that before looking at the Seventh-day Adventist Church's position in that system.

A number of scholars have analyzed the imperial state's role in China's religious *system*³⁵ (Freedman 1974:19-41; Watson and Johnson 1985), particularly its role in fashioning an official orthodoxy that sought to bring all forms of religious expression under a state defined structure, venerating certain gods and local deities while relegating others to the convenient category of 'heterodox' faiths³⁶ (Faure 1999:21-42). Argument surrounds the development of the C. K. Yang defined system where the imperial bu-

reaucracy appropriated local gods and regional deities into the imperial hierarchy of gods and transferred down to the village level the state cult of ancestor worship and, loosely defined, “Confucian” rituals. We are arguing that the Chinese Communist Party’s policy of official religions and the ease with which seemingly peaceful groups can be designated as ‘heterodox’ is in line with this tradition³⁷ (Harrell and Perry 1982:284-303). In fact, there is a new form of orthodoxy present in Communist China that mirrors the imperial model but strikes out in bold new directions through the Communist Party’s official atheist stance. The imperial bureaucracy paralleled the hierarchy of gods in Chinese religion (or vice versa) and the emperor on earth, like the jade emperor above, was the pinnacle of that system. Today, China’s government is free from having to patronize any one particular religion or from deifying any particular god that may appear on the religious spectrum. Instead, the state fashions itself as the leader of various religious traditions, ethnic groups, kindred, and tongues in a valiant cause to form a glorious and harmonious polity.

For this new model of communist orthodoxy to function, all parties concerned must willingly submit to the state and trust in its leadership. In the absence of the imperial system, concepts of the *Mandate of Heaven* are rarely discussed but are not too far from the minds of China’s leaders who are concerned with separatist movements in religious and politically sensitive areas like Xizang (Tibet) and Xinjiang (Sinkiang). Today’s orthodoxy is enshrined in the Party’s principle to not support or foster any religion but to ensure the people’s right to religious belief. Religious belief is free as long as one participates in a recognized religious body and worships at a registered location. Marxist principles suggested the need for religion to end so that people could be freed from internecine strife and society could progress (Marx 1977:39-62).

But that did not prove successful in China’s early communist history and the state has since tried more *Chinese* methods to ensure religious harmony. Those methods rest on all religious groups participating in state sanctioned religious organizations. Non-participation would result in the heterodox label and certain suppression of illegal activities.

Conclusion

The Adventist mission in southern China has been largely successful in spite of operating in a hostile religious environment. The southern region of China historically has been subjected to more foreign influences than other parts of China and was therefore more receptive to foreign religions that in other places, so that from the very beginning, Adventism found a more receptive audience there. Other Christian missionaries had already penetrated the region before the arrival of the Adventist Chinese mission-

aries and there was already in existence a population of Christian Chinese. Adventists drew most of their converts from this group. The advent message was carried there at the beginning not by foreign missionaries but by Chinese nationals who understood the language and culture of the people. The most significant factor however, was very early in the mission, these Chinese workers indigenized the work to suit the needs of the Chinese locals. Contextualization was part of the *modus operandi* of their mission strategy. After the communist takeover, they continue to adapt to the changing conditions to survive. They covered Adventism—a Western religion—with Chinese characteristics.

Notes

¹Probation is a term used by Adventist to describe the period during which an individual can be saved. After probation closes, there is no more possibility for salvation.

²To protect the Christians and their community from any potential reprisal, the name of this province will be kept anonymous.

³Philip Zheng was baptized in Sumatra by Adventist missionary R. W. Munson. Through increased access and study of pioneers like Zheng, foreign and Chinese researchers alike are now able to paint a more complete picture of China's experience with Christianity and reassess the missionary impact.

⁴Divine intervention or healing is a common refrain among conversion stories for Chinese Christians.

⁵'Truth' in Adventism is often synonymous with the Seventh-day Sabbath and its associated teachings.

⁶In a section on their website titled *Mission and Service*, "Adventists have embraced the philosophy that education should be redemptive in nature, for the purpose of restoring human beings to the image of God, our Creator. Mental, physical, social, and spiritual health, intellectual growth, and service to humanity form a core of values that are essential aspects of the Adventist education philosophy." Emphasizing the main aspects of mental, physical and social well being, Adventist schools, often called 'San-yu' (three educations) in East Asia, often employ a work study approach where students can work on school run business on campus to support their education. Adventist health institutions, likewise, are tied into the church's espoused vegetarian ideal and holistic healing methods.

⁷When the former school site was reopened as a health care center in 2001, many former students came back to visit. Many of them never joined the Adventist Church. I was able to interview two former students who are current members of the Adventist Church, one of them a practicing pastor.

⁸Adventists, like Salvation Army affiliated groups and the Little Flock, were forbidden to practice their distinctive worship styles in New China.

⁹"Signs of the Times" had the largest distribution of Christian periodicals

in China pre-1949. See Löwenthal, et. al. 1940. Distribution by province is also listed in this source.

¹⁰Mark Qiu is introduced later in the paper as a major leader in the communist era.

¹¹Batch U103-0-89-6. Numbering system is specific to The Shanghai Municipal Archives whose Christian records are catalogued in Ma and Wu 2002.

¹²Ibid. This data only reflects a small portion of the overall number of workers since it does not count colporteurs or people working at church institutions. The 68 and 61 number only points to those who were actively involved in preaching.

¹³The term ‘profession of faith’ refers to joining the Adventist church by professing one’s acceptance of church doctrine and agreeing to structure one’s life according to it. This is usually reserved for baptized Christians who wish to join the Adventist church while baptism itself is reserved for new converts.

¹⁴Defined as Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang.

¹⁵Defined as Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi.

¹⁶Batch U103-0-89-6.

¹⁷In an interview with one senior church member in *Xinzhu*, he shared that during the Pacific War, the Japanese took all foreigners prisoner, thereby halting any mission work and organized meetings by missionaries with the Chinese. This gentleman’s own family continued to meet at home and eventually with the missionary when he was released.

¹⁸Although this probably decreased in severity by the 1930s, but certainly in the beginning of the Protestant missionary effort, there was a large focus on explaining the value of Western civilization by teaching Western science and humanities in Christian schools.

¹⁹The Apostle Paul in the Bible, outside of Christ himself, is the Christian’s greatest example of suffering for the gospel. The New Testament is replete with messages from him and other apostles encouraging the Christian to persevere in suffering, as Christ did. Among those passages are: 2 Tim 1:8, Phil 1:29, Rom 8:17, 18, and Phil 3:10, 11 which closes with a promise of resurrection from death itself.

²⁰The Chinese government White Paper on Religion (1997) also states, “The ‘Cultural Revolution’ (1966 to 1976) had a disastrous effect on all aspects of the society in China, including religion.”

²¹This comment probably reflects disagreement between those church members who wanted to fully embrace this new economic opportunity and others that felt that Christians should be more conservative and less enthusiastic about government initiatives, even seemingly positive ones. In the end, the conservatives won and all business on church property ceased.

²²Christians in China today usually use the term ‘patriotic’ to refer to those among them who participate in the official, government supported churches.

It does carry a pejorative meaning since official churches are viewed as biased theologically and representing the will of the state.

²³From Smith's personal observations while attending church at coastal cities in China, starting church at 8 AM is a fairly widespread practice. The worldwide Adventist practice of having 'divine service' at 11 AM, with the sermon starting at 11:30 is not a rule and may simply reflect North American worship habits.

²⁴It is often difficult to differentiate between cults and unofficial underground churches in China. This is largely because the government categorizes large underground movements as cults, whether they are benign or not.

²⁵Ping'an church member, 2006. The informant happened to be visiting the Ping'an church while Smith was present.

²⁶According to Article 2, no one may compel another person to believe in religion or *not* to believe in religion.

²⁷Where their faith is concerned, however, most Christians are more apt to be loyal to the dictates of their religion than to the dictates of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, they should not be misconstrued as a burgeoning class of people who might one day rise up and overthrow the Communist Party! As a 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Survey reveals, Chinese are the most satisfied people in the world when it comes to their government; 81% of them were satisfied with the state of their nation. The country with the next highest degree of satisfaction was Egypt with 55%. This survey, however, does have a flaw in that it mainly surveys urban Chinese. We know that most rural Chinese are comparatively less happy with the state of the nation and consequentially would give a much lower score. However, since the research for this project was conducted among mostly city, the survey results probably hold for Christians there also in so far as they believe the government plays a favorable role in economic development, for example.

²⁸Examples of indigenous Chinese Christian groups that did not support the Party post 1949 include the Little Flock started by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng) and continued by Witness Lee (Li Changshou). The Little Flock is now largely active outside of the Chinese mainland but groups like the True Jesus Church have maintained their work in China.

²⁹Ryan Dunch's 2001 study, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China 1857-1927*, shows how the combination of Christianity and politics was already accepted in the broader region as early as the 1911 revolution. Christians, particularly pastors, were accepted in this society because of their education and their ability to deliver healing through western medicine, for example. Yip Ka-Che's 1971 thesis, *The anti-Christian movement in China, 1922-1927* also shows a lower number of protests in the south in contrast to areas surrounding Beijing and Shanghai.

³⁰Zheng, ostensibly, went to China to participate in Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui which rose to oppose the declining Qing dynasty.

³¹I am referring to the personal networks and kinship ties that Guo had as a prominent member of the local society.

³²This is a recognized principle of the Three-Self Church that purports that Western denominationalism is really factionalism and weakens the church. In contrast, they would say, the Three-Self Church presents an alternative model of unity. An article in *Tianfeng*, the official periodical of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, provides evidence of its continuing saliency.

³³For example, in March 2006 church members in *Xinzhu* told the author of a religious movement going on in America that was of some concern to eschatologically minded Adventists. Although said author (Smith) is regularly in touch with the currents that sweep through the church, he was not privy to this information as they were.

³⁴Smith has confirmed this in at least three different cities: Nanjing, Shanghai, and Beijing. Again reaffirming local variation, Adventists are not the only group in *Xinzhu* with their own building, designated only for their use. The “True Jesus Church” (Zhen Yesu Jiaohui), a Chinese born group that also worships on the seventh-day Sabbath, also has their own private structure.

³⁵I accept the treatise initiated by C. K. Yang 1960, but solidified by Maurice Freedman, that the religious behavior exhibited in imperial China was part of a unified religious *system* and that the variations observed were mainly differences determined by position and station in life. For more see, Freedman 1974. The imperial rituals *did* penetrate down to the village level where they were administered by elites and Daoist priests. For this aspect, see Watson 1985.

³⁶An excellent discussion of the development of this Song Dynasty practice that lasted all the way through the Qing. His argument surrounds the development of the C.K. Yang defined system where the imperial bureaucracy appropriated local gods and regional deities into the imperial hierarchy of gods and transferred down to the village level the state cult of ancestor worship and, loosely defined, “Confucian” rituals.

³⁷Faure 1999, for example, begins with an imperial censor in the Tang dynasty traveling to Guangdong to destroy a heterodox temple that did subscribe to the official cult. The problem that Harrell and Perry bring out (largely citing Overmyer 1976 and Naquin 1981) is that many groups that were relegated to the category of heterodox may have been Millenarian but did actually do anything outright to threaten the state’s power. The state felt threatened because group member associations were formed outside of established principles, i.e. the five relationships: sovereign-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger brother, friend-friend.

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