

The Kingdom and Power: Elements of Growth in Chinese Christianity Some Personal Insights

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1. Introduction

In Mk 9:1 Jesus is telling his disciples and others: “I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.” (NIV, New International Version). The connection made in this saying between the kingdom of God and power has disturbed many exegetes. For this reason, some think that the power, δύναμις, here only refers to Jesus’ own miracles and exorcisms which many just did not see or understand at the time.¹ But there is nothing indicating that seeing here has a figurative meaning. Others assume that the power of the kingdom refers to Jesus’ second coming in glory to judge the world.² However, neither the context nor the timeframe of the listeners’ life span allow for this interpretation. F. F. Bruce argues that the coming of the kingdom with power during the audience’s lifetime can only refer to the powerful coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. From this time on the church grew rapidly with thousands joining on a single day. This means Mk 9:1 should neither be seen in the context of a realized nor an apocalyptic eschatology, but rather in connection with a prophetic eschatology.³ The rapid growth of Christianity in contemporary China may serve as an example to confirm the connection made by F. F. Bruce between the kingdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

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- 1 Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (WBC [World Biblical Commentary] 34b), Nashville: Nelson 2001, pp. 28f. Accordingly, the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) translates: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” The TNIV (Today’s New International Version) follows this interpretation. However, the object clause “that the kingdom ...” suggests the presence of a ὅτι-clause in the Greek text which is also not the case.
- 2 Cf. Eduard Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (NTD 1), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1989, p. 96. Similarly Thomas R. Hatina, “Who Will See ‘The Kingdom of God Coming with Power’ in Mark 9,1 – Protagonists or Antagonists?,” in: *Biblica* 86 (2005), pp. 20-34. The verse in his opinion refers to the final judgment of the ungodly which is coming in a powerful way.
- 3 The KJV (King James Version), the NASB (New American Standard Bible), the ESV (English Standard Version), the GNB (Good News Bible), and the German Luther and Elberfelder Bibles translate the saying in this sense.

In the year 2007, when I was preaching in a new church in the southern part of Nanjing which originally was a meeting point, there were about 150 people attending the worship service. The church was about $\frac{1}{4}$ filled. Many of the worshippers were beaming at me, because they probably for the first time heard and saw a foreigner preaching the gospel. Two years later, when I preached there again, the church had grown substantially. The sanctuary was filled to the last row and the last seat. I was amazed, I would have never expected such an increase.

In 2009, I participated, as I often do, in the English worship service of St. Paul's Church in Nanjing. Usually about 250 people, mostly students, are meeting there. The overall church attendance is about 2,000. On that day 11 young people from the English congregation were baptized. Altogether there were 56 baptisms in the church on that Sunday morning. Since there are two baptism services a year this means that there are more than 100 people baptized annually just in this congregation. I was impressed. I was not used to such numbers from the western churches I attended before. Unfortunately, most Chinese churches do not have enough church workers to provide the young believers with adequate training and opportunity for fellowship.

These two experiences must be seen in a larger context. In contrast to past centuries, currently Christianity in China is growing at an enormous rate. In the following article I am going to survey the growth of the Chinese church since the 1980s, trying to answer two questions: First, what prompted this extraordinary development which reminds us of the beginnings of the Christian movement as described in the Acts of the Apostles and which in later church history may be unprecedented? Second, which are the human factors discernible in the spreading of the gospel among the Chinese people that should be considered by the church in other places? Or in short: Why does the Christian movement in China exhibit such an extraordinary power and energy which Christianity in the west often is lacking?

2. Some Numbers

After 150 years of Protestant mission history only moderate growth of Christianity in China could be observed. At the time of the so called liberation, the takeover by the Communists in 1949, there were about 700,000 Protestant Chinese Christians in the country. Between 1950 and 1952 the expulsion of the missionaries followed. After the persecution during the Cultural Revolution from 1966–1976 Protestants in China surprisingly numbered 1.5 million, in 1982 3 million, in 1986 6.7 million, in 1992 9.4 million, and in 1998 16.7 million.⁴ Since the opening of China in 1978 and the implementation of a limited religious freedom in 1982 the Chinese church is growing at an exponential rate.

Today (2010) China has a population of about 1.33 billion people of which 20 million belong to the Protestant church according to the numbers of the official TSPM (Three Self Patriotic Movement). However, Yu Jianrong, professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, rather estimates the number of Christians in the official Protestant

4 Cf. Zhuo Xinping, "Christentum und Christentumsforschung in China – aktuelle Tendenzen," in: *Aktuelle China-Nachrichten* 2008, No. 95, p. 2.

church between 18 and 30 million and those belonging to the so called house churches between 45 and 60 million.⁵ The World Christian Database assumes 50-70 million believers in about 300 unofficial house church networks. The numbers given for Catholic Christians in China range from the official 5.7 million to an estimated 12 to 14 million. A researcher from Renmin University in Beijing publicly gave the number of almost 90 million Christians in China including the house church members. These numbers agree quite well with those of western observers who assume the total numbers of Christians in China to be between 80 and 100 million,⁶ with some estimates going up to 130 million or 10% of the population. In other words, Christianity in China has experienced an exponential growth since 1949 with a 100fold increase among Protestants during the last 60 years, while most of this growth occurred during the last 30 years.

It is noteworthy that the majority of the Chinese Christians lives in rural areas and has very little education as well as Christian training. In recent years, however, many intellectuals and university students have become Christians in the cities. Yet, the majority are still older people, primarily women with a low level of education. The distinction between the official church and the house churches in the statistics is difficult. Except for leadership structures, there are relatively few theological and sociological differences between the members of the house churches and those worshipping in the official church.⁷ The majority of the unregistered or house churches in the countryside is not opposed to affiliating with the official church and for this reason they should not be called underground churches. However, in the urban areas some house churches are opposed to and others are affiliated with the official church.⁸ In the following I am trying to discern which may be the major reasons for the extraordinary growth of the church in China.

3. A Praying Community

I am always very impressed when I hear that quite a number of my students at Nanjing Seminary are getting up at 5:30h in the morning for prayer. Every morning they are praying together for their families, their teachers, their school, and their studies. When I mention even the smallest problem they tell me: "We will pray for you." When they come to me to confer about thesis topics some tell me: "We will pray about it and tell you after the summer break." And I am very moved when some of my students ask me, either in passing or after longer conversations: "Please pray for me and my family." This is not only so with the students, sometimes even church leaders ask me to pray for them. Not only private, but also public prayer is strong. It is energetic and full of expectation. From some churches

5 The numbers presented here are taken from Roman Malek, "Volksrepublik China: Kirche und Religionen in Zahlen, Statistiken 2009/2010," in: *China heute* 2010, No. 1, pp. 22-33, here pp. 22 and 30.

6 Cf. for example David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, Washington, D.C.: Regnery 2006, pp. 7f.

7 For an impression of a contemporary Chinese house church see Gotthard Oblau, "Gotteslob zwischen Laken und Linoleum. Zu Besuch in einer christlichen Migrantengemeinde in Peking," www.doam.org/archiv/textea/china/china_gotthardoblau_Migrantengemeinden2000.pdf (accessed on July 22, 2010).

8 See on this Don Snow, "Understanding the Christian Community in China," from September 18, 2003, http://www.christianityinchina.org/Common/Admin/showNews_auto.jsp?Nid=450&Charset=big5 (accessed on June 12, 2008); originally published in *China News Update*.

I hear that they have long prayer meetings, especially among the leaders and before important decisions. They know that they need God's guidance when they take responsibility for thousands of people. Besides, prayer is the greatest source of unity within the church.

Prayer has been the source of strength and perseverance and the means of unity among the Christians during the hard times of persecution. For more than 10 years, during the Cultural Revolution and beyond, the primary action the believers could take was prayer, ministry was hardly possible anymore. And God answered their prayers and blessed the church with continuous growth.⁹ Many books have been written about Chinese believers under persecution. In regard to prayer they have much in common with the experience of George Müller from Bristol who recorded in his diary every prayer for his orphanages together with God's answer. With his whole life and ministry Müller only wanted to show that God answered each one of his prayers during almost 70 years of a very successful ministry. If it is possible to learn how to pray (cf. Lk 11:1), then the Chinese Christians have learnt to pray.

4. A Strong Witness

A while ago we had some visitors from abroad who came to our house nearby the old campus of Nanjing Seminary. In town they asked an older lady for the way to the seminary. She said: "Yes, the seminary is nearby, you need to go in this direction. Do you already know Jesus?" Our visitors were quite surprised, because this was the first contact they had on their trip to China which happened to be in Nanjing. And the first person they met asked them whether they knew Jesus. Most ironically, they were a group of university teachers teaching intercultural theology. They wanted to find out what Chinese Christianity was like. At least one important aspect they found out.

The personal witness plays a central role in Chinese Christianity. Due to their biblical faith people think of it as a personal responsibility of every Christian to share the gospel with the people around them. Besides the worship service in the church this is the primary approach to evangelism, since Christian events outside their premises are not permitted. Their witness is simple, clear, and very personal. For this reason they are able to communicate the gospel well. The personal experience with Jesus in their everyday life plays a central role in Chinese Christianity. Almost every sermon contains reports about Christian experiences. For this reason many worship services include personal testimonies. This makes the Christian message personal and practical and in this way convincing and attractive. When I asked my students what they would like to see most in a church magazine, they unanimously answered: "testimonies." When I am preaching in the churches of Nanjing, I also try to include fitting personal examples. After the service typically many listeners talk to me and pick up on these little stories. The Chinese Christians love per-

9 For some reports on contemporary community prayer in China, see Gotthard Oblau, "Pentecostal by Default? Reflections on Contemporary Christianity in China," paper presented at the Birmingham conference "Pentecostalism in Asia," September 2001, in: A. Anderson – E. Tang (eds.), *Asian and Pentecostal*, London: Regnum 2005, www.doam.org/archiv/textea/china/china_gotthardoblau_pentecostalbydefault2001.pdf (accessed on July 22, 2010), here pp. 17f.

sonal testimonies, because they know about the power of the personal witness and they love to strengthen each other's faith through testimonies.

Most of the Chinese sermons are quite evangelistic, Christ centered, well presented, and well articulated. They are simple and clear with many personal testimonies. They stress the soteriological aspect of the Christian faith and the personal relationship of the believer with Christ. The preachers emphasize Christ's love for the people and his help in everyday life situations, as well as the Christian calling. Social, economic, ecological, ethical, and scientific topics are not too often covered.¹⁰ Instead, many sermons exhibit a strong heaven and hell dualism which is intended evangelistically. Here contextualization is happening only to a limited degree, but the academic publications of the official church show an increasing sensitivity during recent years.¹¹ The western observer will also miss a historical exegesis. Instead proof-texting and allegorical interpretation of Scripture are widespread. Obviously, most preachers had very little formal training and their audience has a low level of education. So Chinese preaching only offers an incomplete representation of the gospel just as others do, but it clearly explains and enthusiastically communicates the central elements of the Christian faith. In this way Chinese preaching effectively meets the existential needs of the people, but it usually does not yet address the pressing issues of society.

5. Itinerant Preachers and Physical Healing

According to various estimates more than 50% of the Chinese Christians, primarily in the impoverished rural areas where the majority of Christians live, have come to believe through physical healing.¹² One of my students at the seminary stemming from the city of Hangzhou tells me that his parents and grandparents regularly prayed for healing, because in the rural area where he grew up there were no medical services available, and his family frequently received healing. Caroline Fielder in her article on Christianity in rural China reports: "Many rural Chinese feel trapped both spiritually and financially in a spiral of

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- 10 See on this Richard J. Mouw, "Christianity and Culture: A Challenge for the New China," address at Fuller Theological Seminary on January 3, 2007, http://www.christianityinchina.org/Common/Admin/showNews_auto.jsp?Nid=429&Charset=big5 (accessed on December 6, 2008).
- 11 Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China. K.H. Ting and the Chinese Church*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2007, pp. 359f., recognizes new and positive approaches on contextualization among younger teachers of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (NJUTS) and other leaders in the church: "These young scholars vary a great deal in their emphasis and approach. Some are deeply committed to evangelical theology, while others are more liberal and experimental. Their published work taken as a whole reflects a theological interpretation that seeks to relate Christianity to Chinese society and culture. What remains to be seen is whether they will be able to develop a more comprehensive approach to contextual theology that can provide a solid theological grounding for the churches in the future," p. 360.
- 12 See on this Caroline Fielder, "The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China," in: *Concilium* 44 (2008) 2, pp. 174-184; published online at China Online Study Centre (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland), here pp. 7f. with the report of an exorcism initiating a family conversion on p. 8, [caroline_fielder_growth_of_the_rural_protestant_church.pdf](http://www.chinaonlinecentre.org) at www.chinaonlinecentre.org (accessed on August 12, 2010); Yip Ching-Wah, "Protestantisches Christentum und Volksreligion in China: Ein Fall von Synkretismus?," in: M. Gänßbauer (ed.), *Christentum chinesisch in Theorie und Praxis*, Hamburg: EMW – China InfoStelle 2003, pp. 27-60, especially pp. 31-34 and 43-55; Claudia Währisch-Oblau, "The Healing Power of Faith," in: *Amity News Service*, April 1996; and Claudia Währisch-Oblau, "Church Growth in Anhui," in: *China Study Journal*, August 1994, pt. 2, p. 39.

dependency on the ritual imposed by certain local folk religion practices, many of which are intricately linked into village life. In areas where folk religion exercises a profound influence demon possession is considered a reality and several cases of possession and subsequent exorcism were shared with me. Christianity is increasingly seen as a means of escape and can be perceived as a progressive force in traditional rural communities.”¹³ Obviously, the supernatural element is an essential part of the biblical and practically oriented faith of most rural Chinese Christians.

In contrast to rural China, among the city Christians many do not believe in divine healing and not many healings are reported. When I share my own testimonies of healing, some are eager to receive prayer while many others are very reluctant. Like in the west urban Christians are strongly influenced by the modern rationalist worldview, but also by their former Marxist teaching. They can only accept what reason and science can prove. However, since with the dawning of the post-modern era physical healing and other supernatural phenomena have become more acceptable in the west, healing may become more common in urban China as well. The rapid growth of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches in the west as well as in South America and Africa may point in this direction. Whether and in which way Christianity in urban China will embrace the new mindset the future will show.

Like in early Christianity, today many itinerant preachers are passing through the rural areas of China proclaiming the gospel from village to village.¹⁴ Due to the lack of medical services in these areas the preachers also pray for healing which the people in turn frequently experience.¹⁵ If a sick person is healed, commonly the other members of the family start believing in the gospel too and often enough the whole village becomes Christian. If a whole family or a village accepts Jesus, this usually is quite noticeable to the surrounding people. The Christian circles grow and house meetings are started followed by house church networks and the founding of bigger churches. This dynamic together with visions, dreams, and the private reading of Scripture¹⁶ largely covers the rapid growth of Christianity in the rural areas. Frequently, only a few years after the first conversion occurred, we find churches spread over a whole area like a county with hundreds and even thousands of members.¹⁷ However, since the many new converts have almost nobody who is experienced enough to instruct them, often strange teachings, heresies, or cults occur. This is the downside of the rapid growth in rural Chinese Christianity.

Some of the Christian sects in China do not only practice “sheep stealing”, the proselytizing of orthodox or mainline Christians, but they also apply illegal and criminal practices like kidnapping. Tony Lambert states: “The most dangerous (cult) is currently Eastern Lightning, which preaches a Chinese, female Messiah and uses gangster methods to win

13 Fielder, “The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China,” p. 8.

14 For an example see Oblau, “Pentecostal by Default?,” p. 14.

15 For some healing reports from China see Oblau, “Pentecostal by Default?,” pp. 3f., 8, and 11-13; and Oblau, “Gotteslob,” p. 2.

16 See on this Fielder, “The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China,” pp. 8-10.

17 The story told by Oblau, “Pentecostal by Default?,” pp. 3f., illustrates this pattern very well.

and keep converts.”¹⁸ Eastern Lightning today is rapidly spreading also in the cities. A young pastor from a city church in Suzhou in southern China tells me that this is their major concern right now. At the same time western Christian sects like the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are also making a great missionary effort in China. For example, in many of the big cities there are Mormon communities by now.

6. A Lay Movement

After the so called liberation, when the missionaries had to leave China and the church institutions like the Christian universities and hospitals were taken over by the government, most of the Chinese seminaries were closed. On the Protestant side only the three biggest schools were permitted to continue. In 1952, they were integrated into Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (NJUTS). For this reason only very few clergy could be trained anymore before the period of 1966–1976 during which theological education was discontinued. In the 1980s, the Chinese seminaries eventually reopened with Nanjing Seminary as the first, but they all were short of academically qualified teachers. Today, as of spring 2012, there are 21 seminaries and Bible schools in the country which is less than one per province, and additional training centers for lay workers in most of the larger cities. Yet, these cannot provide sufficient training to supply this rapidly growing church with enough ministers and church workers. For instance, the newest Bible school in the 8 million metropolis of Chongqing in Sichuan Province from the fall term 2010 onward has only three fulltime professors who are recent graduates from Nanjing Seminary. In consequence, the Chinese seminaries only produce a few hundred seminary graduates each year, less than one for every big city. Accordingly, very few trained ministers are serving in the rural areas, and most of the larger cities with a population of several million usually only have 4 or 5 ordained clergy. This means, the Chinese church is basically run by lay workers.

For the rural context Caroline Fielder concludes: “The simple form and structure of Protestantism means that even if there is no minister or church building, it is still possible to engage in religious life. This structure fosters an environment which encourages the development of lay workers, with little church bureaucracy to block the vision of individual workers.”¹⁹

Due to the lack of academic training, the originally mostly clerical Chinese church has largely become a lay movement. This kind of structure requires quite a number of untrained believers to take on responsibility in the church. Since the time when the missionaries left, the amount of Christian multipliers, mature and experienced believers with official tasks in the church, has grown steadily. With the opening of China in the 1980s and increasing religious freedom, this situation has not really changed. Like in the early church, most congregations are still run by elders, evangelists, and deacons whose ministry is largely based on their faith experience.²⁰ Without the many lay preachers it would

18 Tony Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, revised and updated, London: Monarch Books 2006, p. 18.

19 Fielder, “The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China,” p. 4.

20 See on this Robert Banks, Art. “Church Order and Government,” in: G.F. Hawthorne – R.P. Martin – D.G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Downers Grove, Ill. – Leicester: InterVarsity Press 1993, pp. 131-137, here p. 134.

not be possible to offer several worship services in most of the churches. The same is true for the many baptismal and Sunday school classes which every church offers. In this way more lay people receive training on the job than any array of seminaries could provide. Since the lay people feel appreciated and needed, there are more lay people in active ministry than in most western churches. Naturally, such a large lay movement can be much more efficient than a church ministry which depends primarily on paid staff. This means, not the lack of sophistication, but the empowerment of the laity has become an important element of growth in Chinese Christianity. And the same can be argued for concerning the issue of women in ministry.

Besides the simplicity of Chinese Christian life, community, and ministry, it is noteworthy that the majority of people in the Chinese churches consists of women, often making up 2/3 or 3/4 of a congregation. With a lower social status and less pay than their male neighbors or colleagues they find a new identity and a new home in the church. Caroline Fielder summarizes: "The church offers a place where they do have a voice, a sense of community, a new family, and for many women membership offers them a social standing higher than they enjoy outside of the Christian community."²¹ But this is not the only reason for these disproportionate numbers. Being attractive to the women, church membership is a problem for many men. As the head of the household providing for the major part of the family income, many men are afraid of disadvantages in their public or government careers or even the loss of their jobs if they join a church. So they either do not become Christians or they remain secret believers, like the religion professor in Shaanxi Province who is not baptized and who only rarely goes to church for "academic purposes," but who always prays at the lunch table. For these reasons the Chinese church is a community of many highly active lay people among whom the women as the majority can share and promote the gospel most freely, reaching primarily other women.

7. The Religious Vacuum

When I was taken home from a church visit together with one of my Chinese colleagues, the driver of the car asked my colleague: "I see that you are Christians. Please tell me something about Christianity. How can my life continue even after death?" During the next 30 minutes, until we reached our destination, my colleague explained to the driver the basics of the Christian faith. I was very surprised by this question, because I was not used to such an interest in Christianity from western countries. Later, however, I noticed that people regularly would come to me and ask me about my Christian faith. Why are the Chinese people so interested in Christianity today?

With the devastating results of the Cultural Revolution, Marxist idealism and state doctrine have been stripped of their appeal to the Chinese masses. Instead, consumerism has been advocated which is supposed to fill the needs of the Chinese people. On the material level this has led to a selfish elbow society which has largely lost its morals and sense of

²¹ Fielder, "The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China," p. 6.

justice.²² Selfishness, hypocrisy, favoritism, partisanship, corruption, and fraud are common notions. Even in kindergarten and school extra payments are necessary for good grades and good treatment, like for a four year old to receive the honor of participating in the flag raising.

According to Wang Zuo'an, the director of the Beijing State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), for the State the rapid growth of Christianity in China is not a problem as long as the church follows the religious regulations.²³ This shows that state policy has changed during recent years. Wang points out that in 2007 the Chinese church has been requested to start charity, welfare, and development programs in order to counteract the moral decay of society. In the past the church was not allowed to become active outside its church walls except through the setting up of nursing homes. Today the church is expected to contribute to the "building of a harmonious society," the ever present government program. With this the church has received an additional opportunity to help the disadvantaged part of society and reach people with the gospel.

On the religious level a noticeable vacuum has occurred which cannot be filled anymore by the traditional Chinese teachings of Laozi, Confucius, and others.²⁴ Only about 1% of the Chinese people profess to be followers of Daoism, while 31.4% of the population claim to be adherents of a religious belief.²⁵ Today Daoism and the more philosophical Confucianism are seen by many only as a cultural heritage which is not able to meet the challenges of a free market economy and a rapidly changing society. For this reason these two are growing the least among contemporary Chinese traditions and religions.

In contrast, Chinese Buddhism is reawakening. Between 11 and 16% of the Chinese claim to be Buddhists. This popularity, however, often rests on a utilitarian understanding. Almost every restaurant and many homes and businesses have their own Buddhist shrine, just like countless dashboards are sporting little Buddha figurines. Obviously, people expect protection and material blessing from this practice. The Buddhist temples where people go to offer incense and money serve the same purpose. Yet, there are no Buddhist communities for the common people like the church offers for the Chinese believers.

On the spiritual level the Chinese religions primarily require self-cultivation in order to achieve a divine state of being, but they do not know a relationship with a living God who is creator and sustainer of all. Due to past disappointments and hurts many Chinese are longing for such a relationship, for forgiveness, reconciliation, and an everlasting life in the presence of the creator. So the need for fellowship, spiritual direction, and ethical instruction for the Chinese people today seems to be met best by the Christian faith and community. Probably for this reason Christianity is the fastest growing religion in China.

22 See on this Gao Feng, "Die christliche Botschaft und das Wirtschaftswachstum Chinas" (translated from the Chinese by M. Gänßbauer), in: *Aktuelle China-Nachrichten* 2007, No. 87, pp. 1-6. Rev. Gao is the current president of the China Christian Council and Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

23 The interview with Wang Zuo'an of January 5, 2010 is available at *Amity News Service*, www.amitynewsservice.org (accessed on July 20, 2010).

24 See on this Xu Jilin, "Spiritual Crisis and Renaissance of Religions in Contemporary China," in: *Concilium* 44 (2008) 2, pp. 38-46.

25 For a comparison of the Chinese religions in numbers see Malek, "Statistiken," p. 22.

Not all of the aspects mentioned above are of equal importance to those who become Christians. Some are looking for meaning in their lives and are attracted by the soteriological aspect, others got to know the living God through the experience of his healing power, and a third group is impressed by the Christian ethical teaching which covers every aspect of human existence rather than just the family ties as the traditional teachings primarily do.

Besides the millions who have become Christians through healing experiences, today there are many high level academics in the cities for whom healing is not an issue. Due to the religious vacuum they are mostly attracted to Christianity by the soteriological or the ethical aspect. Some of these people teach or research about Christianity at the Chinese universities.²⁶ However, they usually do not join a church, either because they are afraid of losing their job or their interest is more of an academic nature. For this reason these new kinds of adherents have been called culture Christians. Through their publications, translations, and public conferences they promote the more academic side of Christianity among the growing class of well educated people.

8. A New Openness and Western Orientation

Since the beginning of Nestorian mission to China in the 7th century, the Chinese society and its leadership for the most part were open to Christianity. Only when they noticed western political influence did they reject Christianity. During the time of the modern mission movement beginning with the 19th century the church grew, but Christianity also experienced a noticeable rejection. This was largely due to the close connection between the missionaries and the colonial powers in China and the strong western leadership within the Chinese church. This state of affairs largely remained until the expulsion of the missionaries by the new Communist government in 1952. After this the many western denominations which were present in China were united by the government into a single Chinese church, except the independent churches which continued in the so called house church movement. Overnight the Chinese church had become an indigenous church. From now on until the end of the Cultural Revolution the church was under suspicion and persecution, because the Christians were denounced as Rightist, imperialist, and counter-revolutionary. Many thought that the church would not survive this time of trial, but after the end of Mao's utopia the church became acceptable to the government and to the Chinese people. Christianity had lost its foreign image and the church began to grow rapidly.

In spring of 2009, Nanjing Seminary moved from the downtown area to the new campus located in one of the university cities on the southern outskirts of Nanjing. At Christmas time of that year we were wondering if any of the students from the surrounding institutes who did not know us would still come to our Christmas celebration. Yet, already

26 As city people, most of their publications treat philosophical, sociological, or theological questions; there is only very little research available on rural Christianity. See on this Leung Kalun, "Cultural Christians and Christianity in China," in: *China Rights Forum* 2003, No. 4, pp. 29-31. For some recent studies on rural Christianity see Fielder, "The Growth of the Protestant Church in Rural China," p. 2, fn. 5; and He Guang-Hu, "Three Generations of Chinese Christianity Researchers: From the 1950s to 2007," in: *Concilium* 44 (2008) 2, pp. 58-70.

one hour before the meeting began the auditorium was packed with visitors, and all of our students made their own seats available. But these 460 seats plus the aisles were not enough. Outside there were still another 200 students standing looking through the windows. Our students were very happy, because so many came, giving them standing ovations. At Christmas 2010 we invited our neighbors again and about two thousand students came to the seminary, in 2011 several thousand were estimated. What makes a Christian event so attractive to these young people?

Today western culture and lifestyle is very popular among young people. Many of them are interested in Christianity exactly because it is an essential part of western culture. With this the charge of Christianity being a foreign or western religion has been completely reversed. And most older people do not mind western orientation anymore either. Even government officials are willing to say that Christianity has contributed substantially to the economic and cultural achievements of the west. Christianity has become a popular religion in China.

9. Conclusion

Taking the various aspects of the Christian life and witness into account, Christianity in China offers an authentic and holistic approach to the Christian faith which is highly relevant to the existential needs of the people. The various elements of church growth in China exhibit a strong biblical orientation. Ever since the faithful witness of the Chinese Christians during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese believers are encouraged to share the gospel, stressing the need for personal salvation. Their praying attitude keeps them united and focused on winning men and women for Christ. Primarily in the impoverished rural areas many follow the example of the early church and travel through the countryside as itinerant preachers. They share the gospel and heal people in the name of Jesus. Physical healing together with the personal testimony, as well as dreams and visions, represent the largest element of church growth in the rural areas. Due to the lack of theological education and the provision of fulltime staff Christianity in China primarily is a lay movement just like the early church. Many lay people join in providing the essential ministry and service functions of the church. This results in a multitude of Christians who are being trained on the job, functioning as a large and lively pool of Christian multipliers. The religious vacuum which is noticeable in Chinese society since the 1980s enhances the success of the Christian witness. In recent years due to the new western orientation many of the younger generation as well as scholars at the universities also became Christians. In spite of ethical problems in some churches which mirror the serious struggles of contemporary Chinese society, the Chinese Christians largely are seen as people of high moral standing which also attracts the Chinese people to the church. In the countryside people are further attracted to the church by the deep social concern which many congregations show. Due to previous restrictions, the city churches are just starting to engage in charity projects. In this way they are hoping to further reach their nation with the love of Christ.

Looking at the numbers alone it becomes evident that in China the kingdom of God is coming with power. Chinese Christianity is highly effective through the application of

basic biblical principles. One of these principles is the general witness to the love of Jesus, another is tapping into the supernatural power of the Christian faith. Secondary factors such as the public mindset are widely supportive. At the same time there is still much room for improvement in the areas of charity, theological education, and contextualization. With this Chinese Christianity is an impressive, yet not perfect example of a church with a great potential for further growth.