

Evangelisation in the Protestant Church in China – Reflections of a Western Sinologist

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The rapid development of the Chinese Protestant church since the 1980s – registered or unregistered – does not have one single or merely a few explanations, but is the result of several varying factors. Nor is there a coordinated or unified specific strategy for evangelisation, largely because of the decentralised and uncoordinated structure of the Chinese Protestant church. National leaders of the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), and teachers at the national Jinling Union Theological Seminary are to some extent preoccupied with ideas of a common Chinese Protestant ecclesiology, but there are also many tendencies towards a return of denominationalism and less of unity.¹ Since 2014 the Chinese party-state has advocated a “sinicization of Christianity” (*jidujiao Zhongguohua* 基督教中国化), which adds yet another dimension to these issues.² From a more practical perspective, there is an element of straightforwardness in the approach of many Chinese Protestants towards non-Christians that differs from the European context. Besides all this, the transforming power of faith is all too often neglected as an element of academic study.

What happens more concretely then in regard to evangelisation? The PRC constitution provides for “freedom of religious belief” (§ 36) but says not much about the actual protection of religious expression and activity, including evangelisation, not more than that it should be in the form of “normal religious activity” (*zhengchang zongjiao huodong* 正常宗教活动). The expression about “normality” is particularly troublesome, and is one of several signs that the CPC and the PRC government would like to assume the right of interpretation over religious matters and even theology. Since the CPC strongly promotes

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- 1 Jinling Union Theological Seminary Vice President Wang Aiming has written on ecclesiology on several occasions, one example is “Tizhi jiaohui yu ziyou jiaohui: wenti, weiji he keneng de chulu 体制教会与自由教会: 问题、危机和可能的出路” (Structural Church and Free Church: Issues, Crises and Possible Ways Out), in: *Lingdao zhe* 领导者, December 2012, No. 49, website Gongshiwang 共识网, www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/gqm/article_2013022077383.html; Brent Fulton, “Denominationalism in China: Pre or Post?”, website China Source, March 25, 2015, www.chinasource.org/blog/posts/denominationalism-in-china-pre-or-post; G. Wright Doyle, “How Should Chinese Urban Churches Organize Themselves?”, website China Source, March 30, 2011, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/how-should-chinese-urban-churches-organize-themselves>.
- 2 Tang Xiaofeng, “Jidujiao weishenme yao Zhongguohua? 基督教为什么要中国化?” (Why Must Christianity Sinicize?), in: *Minzubao* 民族报, August 19, 2014, <http://mzb.com.cn/html/report/140833075-1.htm>.

atheism, and struggles to deal with religiously active party members, it is ironical that at the same time they try to take control of the actual content of religion.

But how does this situation affect evangelisation efforts among Protestants? “Normal” religious activity is supposed to occur within the walls of the place of worship, or another designated area or place for that particular religious group. Therefore outdoor meetings, evangelisation campaigns on the streets or public advertising is not possible, except under special circumstances. In such an environment, personal meetings and small groups have become more important for spreading the Gospel. I have seen this from my own experience through visits to China, and preparing this article I also asked several pastors from the registered Protestant church about the most common and successful methods of evangelising in contemporary China in their view.³ Their answers complemented what I have discerned from empirical and textual studies of religion in contemporary China in the last decade, and I will discuss here some tentative fields or factors that have an impact on evangelisation in the Chinese Protestant church: one-to-one evangelisation and small groups, in-church secularisation, the role of intellectuals, the role of the Bible, healing prayer and miracles, and social belonging.

Individual or Small Group Evangelisation

My limited group of informants rather unanimously mentioned small groups as a primary method of deep evangelisation, going beyond the first curiosity of seekers’ questions or a random visit to a church service. These small groups may take different forms, often categorised for youth, women, men, etc., but sometimes also formed out of a geographical or social context. In such a setting one may come to know the others and feel confident to ask and discuss questions, and also to learn more in a structured way. My informants also mentioned such groups as efficient training points for congregational members wanting to be evangelists, and these groups may also be organised in different categories. In the case of training evangelists, the groups provide good ground for further motivation, Bible training, and how to express oneself in one-to-one or group evangelisation situations.

All around China Protestant groups, registered and unregistered, organise training courses for lay people. Hardly any registered local or regional church centre being built or rebuilt in China today is without a floor or half a building to house lay training sessions. Also unregistered groups organise training courses, but naturally more low-key, in rented premises, but often with similar content as in the registered churches. Following this process is a growing and already strong general awareness of the need to put one’s faith into practice and “spread the Gospel” (*chuan fuyin* 传福音) to others. There is sometimes a straightforwardness in the manner of Chinese Christians that has some importance in this respect. Often you can hear people ask straight out of acquaintances as well as strangers:

3 I contacted a handful of ordained friends working within the framework of the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, living in Central and Eastern China, and asked the following questions: 1) What is the most important method for preaching the Gospel?, 2) Do you have any special experiences to share?, 3) What role does preaching content play?, and 4) What role do individual meetings or small groups play? Their names will not be disclosed to protect their anonymity. Questions were asked by e-mail during August 2015.

“Why don’t you believe in Christianity? Why don’t you believe in Jesus?” (你为什么不信教呢? 为什么不信耶稣?). They may also go directly into an explanation of and discussion about how faith has changed their lives. While this attitude may not be applicable to all Chinese Protestants, it is of high prevalence in many different Chinese church settings. It is interesting to contrast such actions with the more restrained manner of mainstream European Protestants, and possibly the adoption by Chinese Protestants of a “by-gone” paradigm of evangelical Protestant ways of evangelising. It is therefore in a way both very un-Chinese, and in its straightforwardness still very Chinese. What is often perceived by Westerners as goodhearted and sometimes a little over-inquisitive curiosity from Chinese people, may act as an important factor helpful for reaching out to people and for spreading the Gospel. However, this aptness for outreach may also be linked to the lack of continued development in some Chinese church settings, where growth is limited to numbers but missing in depth and continuity. Lack of depth and lack of experienced leadership often hampers congregational development, at worst turning the group into a sect or a dispersing, failed congregation. This complex “field” or factor may be linked to the practical nature of Chinese religiosity in general, where praxis and rituals are sometimes more important than theological explanations and elaborate structure. Having said that, I concur that this point does not quite conform to the relative stability and progress of the Catholic Church in China.

Imbalance in Outreach

Besides the obvious foreign influence on Chinese Protestants through exchanges and visits, and also teaching at seminaries and at training programmes, there are also other more subtle influences that are more surprising. Despite the pronounced opposition of CCC/TSPM to direct foreign mission and also theological influence, the CCC/TSPM Council for Rural Work (Nongcun gongzuo weiyuanhui 农村工作委员会) in the 1990s produced “a small book series for volunteer training” (Yigong peixun xilie xiao congshu 义工培训系列小丛书) with five small tracts. In one of them one can find “18 points for explaining the Bible.”⁴ This book was published in 1996 and is based on a correspondence course publication, *Shijingxue* 释经学 (Hermeneutics), from 1993, published by Far East Broadcasting Centre (FEBC, Jidujiao yuan dong chuanbo zhongxin 基督教远东传播中心) in Taiwan. FEBC is exactly the kind of Western evangelical mission organisation that the party-state and the national CCC/TSPM usually renounce. However, due to the lack of well-structured and good material for lay teaching and training of local church leaders, this tract series was still published and used around the country.

To what extent this particular kind of Bible teaching has penetrated local congregations is more difficult to say, but as it was promoted by the CCC/TSPM it must have had certain impact. With a large percentage of the Chinese population still in the countryside it is reasonable to focus on “rural work,” but it is surprising that the CCC/TSPM still relied in the late 1990s on foreign material from a source they officially kept a distance

4 Yu Cheng 余成, *Nongcun shiyong jiangdaofa* 农村实用讲道法 (Practical Rural Preaching Methods), Nanjing: Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui 1996, pp. 92-144.

from. The registered church has yet to systematically deal with the more well-educated urban population and their spiritual interests, even if local congregations are aware of and deal with the situation accordingly. Information provided by my informants showed that similar methods of evangelisation are used in various parts of China, but this seemingly well-structured and methodical process of evangelisation still leaves some aspects worth further comment. The methods, tone, language and perspective of evangelisation emanating from these efforts are not (yet) perfectly suited for the needs of all groups, especially not the higher educated and elite in society. There is some awareness about this, but still much time and effort needed to come to terms with these issues. It is also related to the general academic educational level within the Protestant church, where few of the clergy have an academic degree. However, this is about to change as the CCC/TSPM in the last few years has promoted the idea of seminary teachers getting degrees, often abroad, and also implementing measures for conferring theological academic degrees in China. Until recently Jinling Union Theological Seminary was the only Protestant seminary to confer academic degrees in the PRC.⁵

One result of the lack of diversification and pursuing a further deepened evangelisation is what I would like to call “in-church secularisation.” This expression is a description of a kind of circular movement where curious seekers came to the church in the 1980s and early 1990s, became Christians and were very active, but since some years are less active. They are still church members, but church life is no longer the most important part of their lives. Economic development has changed their material conditions for the better, and they are now more like secularised European Christians. This group presents a challenge to the rapidly developing Chinese Protestant church. How to keep them in the church, how to re-evangelise? This aspect is often overlooked when analysing Chinese church growth, as only the growth as such is taken into account, not the following steps of development and spiritual growth, not just numbers.

Evangelisation to, among and from Intellectuals

Since the emergence of the so-called “Cultural Christians” in the 1980, with Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫 (b. 1956) in the forefront, at least the registered Protestant church in China has adopted a rather ambivalent attitude to intellectuals and their non-conforming investigations of faith and theology. Liu Xiaofeng was among the first Chinese after 1949 to get a doctorate in theology, in Basel 1993 with a thesis on Max Scheler’s phenomenology. Liu was also a guiding star for other seeking intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s with publications like *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* 拯救与逍遥 and *Zou xiang shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真, of which the latter was his “credo” as a “Cultural Christian.” These books are reflective introductions to Western Protestant and Catholic theology as well as literary works with spiritual value. Liu also adds comparisons to Chinese society and tradition,

5 The 2014 “Zhongguo jidujiao shenxue yuanxiao xuwei shouyi banfa shishi xi ze (shixing) 中国基督教神学院校学位授予办法实施细则 (试行)” (Implementing Rules for the Measures for Conferring Degrees at Chinese Protestant Theological Seminaries [for Trial Implementation]) are available at the CCC/TSPM website, www.ccctspm.org/news/ccctspm/2014/526/14526640.html.

giving Christian teachings a definite place in the Chinese context. Liu's and others' work from this time is not evangelistic, not even traditionally theological, but more essayistic and a kind of polemic for greater plurality in Chinese society, rooted in a private expression of faith. Only a few of the earlier "Cultural Christians" were ever baptised, but were hugely influential for the younger generation of students following in their footsteps. Liu Xiaofeng even envisioned a new kind of Christianity emerging in the form of "Cultural Christianity," and he borrowed Ernst Troeltsch's terminology, calling the established (registered) churches "Kirche," the unregistered churches "Sekte" and the "Cultural Christians" "Mystik."⁶

Among the younger generation were the well-known writer, critic and activist Yu Jie 余杰, author Bei Cun, law scholar and pastor Wang Yi 王怡 and a number of others. Although not evangelising in any traditional sense, what Liu Xiaofeng and other "Cultural Christians" did in the 1980–1990s still had a similar impact. Young persons became interested, curious and wanted to know more, to learn more. They often went through a brief similar stage as their forerunners, approaching theology and faith through culture, but then turning to Christian ethics and eventually theology as such, and also openly professed their faith.

While Liu Xiaofeng only seldom went to a regular church service, today the younger generation has established a number of unregistered congregations in the Central and Eastern parts of China, Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Chengdu, Kunming, Guangzhou and so on. In these congregations we find well-educated, well-articulated and very well-read young Christians, who in recent years seem to have a tendency towards Calvinism and Puritanism, most likely as a reaction to a demoralising society and various issues in other churches and congregations. Geneva at the time of Calvin and Zwingli seems like a model for these groups who are in a kind of spiritual resistance, deprived of their right to worship freely, with pressure from the registered mainstream church as well, and possibly with the notion of being elect, chosen, fitting well into their modern, intellectual but also Confucian inspired mind set. These congregations are very well managed, and often have an internal publication or website where sermons and other material are published.

These intellectual Christians are sometimes called "New Calvinists," sometimes "public theologians," as they are also preoccupied with the notion and role of a "public intellectual." This is a sort of side track to the mainstream Protestant development, appealing to many educated young elites, however not all. Calvinist structure and teachings may be one part of the attraction, but not really the "method" of evangelising. What is attractive are instead the seriousness, the efforts to live as they learn, and the loving and caring approach despite the comparatively harsh message, and strict church discipline is often practiced in these groups.⁷

6 For an in-depth study of the phenomenon of "Cultural Christians" see Fredrik Fällman, *Salvation and Modernity: Intellectuals and Faith in Contemporary China*, Lanham: University Press of America 2008.

7 For more on this topic see Fredrik Fällman, "Calvin, Culture and Christ? Developments of Faith among Chinese Intellectuals," in: Francis Khok Gee Lim (ed.), *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-Cultural Perspectives*, London: Routledge 2013, pp. 152-168, and Alexander Chow, "Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today," in: *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (May 2014) 2, pp. 158-175.

Interestingly, the above mentioned Yu Jie, Bei Cun and Wang Yi have put forth the notion of “evangelising culture” (*wenhua fuyinhua* 文化福音化), arguing that “for long, Chinese Christians, evangelists and the Church have seriously neglected the merits of writing, and the creation of Christian literature, music and art, as well as academic research.” Their aim is to reach the educated elite, and eventually to influence Chinese culture and society at large with the Gospel. Through writings, cultural criticism and artistic expressions such “public theologians” take part in cultural life and public debate, and at the same time express their Christian faith.⁸

One central Christian intellectual in contemporary China, the author Bei Cun, has helped in the promotion of another important factor for Protestant evangelisation in China, the Bible. Although not available in ordinary bookstores, the Bible is readily available in church run outlets in most parts of the country, and is increasingly referred to and acknowledged as important literature, if not primarily religious text. In 2004 Bei Cun was interviewed in the newspaper *Xinjingbao* 新京报 about his “best reads.” His first choice was the Bible, and he explained his choice in this way:

... this is a marvellous book. The notes on every page in the annotated Bible show the corresponding and mutually agreeing texts. For a book written by many persons over a thousand years ago this is very strange. If there was no Holy Spirit revealing it to the prophets then it would certainly be very difficult to achieve such a high level of unity.

Inspiration is not mystical at all, and for authors to create there must also be inspiration. It is only that the former kind [of inspiration] originated from the highest authority and enlightenment, not from man himself. Therefore the language of the Bible has authority ...

Even more strange is that it [the Bible] can provide [material] for scholars to do research, but it can also provide reading for old ladies in the countryside. It is not like a textbook; on the contrary it is more like a living entity, bringing a breath of life.⁹

Social Belonging and Faith Healing

One of my old friends in Beijing is a business consultant in his late forties, originally a middle school teacher from Fujian, later adding studies in English, French and business administration in Beijing. He is now a devout Buddhist, but grew up in a non-religious

8 The notion of “evangelizing culture” is inspired by ideas from Dr. Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tian'en 趙天恩) (1938–2004), an evangelical leader and scholar from Taiwan. Chao led China Ministries International (Zhongguo fuyinhui 中國福音會) and proposed to “Christianize Culture” in the Chinese setting. Quotes from “Fa kan ci 发刊词” (Foreword to the first issue), in: *Fangzhou* 方舟 2005, No. 1, (no publisher given), inside cover. (The publication *Fangzhou* was published by the congregation of the same name in Beijing, without official permission, therefore no formal publishing data in the print issue.)

9 Bei Cun 北村, “Bei Cun jian shu: rensheng shi du (yi)” 北村荐书: 人生十读 (一) (Bei Cun Recommends Books: Ten Reads in Human Life [First]), in: *Xinjingbao* 新京报 (The Beijing News), July 21, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2004-07/21/content_1622311.htm.

family and was an active member of the Communist Youth League in his early adulthood. Some years ago he told me that his mother, who still lives in Fujian, had become a Christian due to the influence of neighbours and friends. In his mind it was more a choice out of social needs than a religious longing, but he indicated that she was now more “harmonious” and had a hope for her last years and thereafter, which he approved of very much, however without sharing her beliefs. This is an interesting example of how social belonging, community and comfort is part of the larger sphere of evangelisation, and possibly also the lack of social cohesion in the rapidly changing and developing contemporary Chinese society.

Community life, genuine belonging and a common commitment to the Church are factors not to be underestimated in the growth of the Chinese Protestant church. Traditional family structures and social life are less important in contemporary society, and socialist collectivist ideas and structures that might have provided some sense of social belonging are also gone, and the void has not been filled by any new nationally uniting idea. Here is a space for Christian evangelisation that only to some extent is filled today.¹⁰

In this respect I would also like to mention faith healing and miraculous occurrences. There have been many stories of miracles coming out of China in the last decades, mostly through evangelical and charismatic sources, often hard to corroborate. However, also in the CCC/TSPM context prayer for healing is a natural element, and in rural areas with lack of adequate access to health care many people turn to the church, maybe after first trying other possibilities but without results. Here is a factor of belonging and trust, possibly even if the outcome of the prayer for healing is not as expected, people may be attracted by genuine involvement and care missing elsewhere. Thus faith healing may be a factor, if not a method, for evangelisation in the Chinese Protestant Church.

“Disturbing the People”

As noted by my informants, and also based on my own observations and experience, “everyday evangelisation” through friends, neighbours and colleagues is one major method among Chinese Protestants. This can be done in many ways, but the straightforwardness and daring to ask about faith is a central point. Such an attitude may not always be well accepted, and for some possibly also disturbing. The Chinese party-state only condones “normal religious activity,” with “normality” conveniently not very well defined, therefore leaving space for interpretation. In later years the Communist party has even asked for religions to promote harmony, and Mr. Jia Qinglin 贾庆林, then CPPCC Chairman, said the following at a national seminar for religious leaders in Beijing in November 2006:

10 Recent studies show that social belonging in rural China is increasingly connected to religious networks, often related to popular religion, Daoism or Buddhism. See for example Qin Mingrui, *Vom Aufbruch zum Verfall. Der Wandel eines chinesischen Dorfes*, Berlin: Reimer Verlag 2002.

I hope that every religious group sturdily establishes a sense of calling, responsibility and urgency for promoting harmony as the important content in the work of religious groups.¹¹

Some years ago a friend of mine who is a Protestant minister and teacher of theology in a province in central China¹² suddenly said something strange when we were talking about evangelisation in China. She said: “We must disturb the people”. At first I could not really follow her thought, but later it became clear that she was referring to Acts 16:16-40 where Paul and Silas are detained in Philippi because they “disturb the city.” Her reference to Paul and Silas is thought provoking as it raises questions of what is “disturbing,” “harmonious” and also what can be the right methods for evangelisation.

The NRSV translation says in Acts 16:20-21 that “these men are disturbing our city, they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” Driven by their faith they preached a message that was deemed “unlawful” and certainly not harmonious, but rather “disturbing.” After a sudden earthquake the prison doors broke open, and they were released and apologised to. Eventually their visit led to the founding of the first Christian congregation on European soil. After the miraculous earthquake the local magistrates found out that Paul and Silas were also Roman citizens, not only Jews as they first thought.

The original Greek text uses the word *ektarassó* (disturb), meaning to stir that which should be calm, also mentally or spiritually. As can be seen from the continuing text it is not so much a matter of adhering to “customs that are lawful” or not, but a message that stirs people. It was easier to claim “unlawfulness” to keep them out, and to keep the “harmony” of local society. Paul and Silas preached a message that had an apparent and direct impact on people, but the local power holders wanted to keep a “harmony” that they knew and could control. There are many parallels here to contemporary society and issues of identity, harmony and normality, just as in present-day China. My friend quite certainly did not mean to “disturb” people in the face value sense of the word, but rather to be straightforward and “stir” people to hear the Gospel.

11 “Jia Qinglin yu quanguo zongjiao tuanti lingdaoren yantaohui quanti chengyuan zuotan 贾庆林与全国宗教团体领导人研讨会全体成员座谈” (Jia Qinglin Talks with All Participants at the National Conference of Religious Leaders), website Xinhua wang, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-11/14/content_5329644.htm.

12 Our discussion took place in Stockholm, Sweden, in May 2006, during a church conference where this woman pastor was invited to speak. She works in the CCC/TSPM framework and prefers to be quoted anonymously.