Theological Construction in the Chinese Church

Chen Zemin

Thirty years ago China was in a state of isolation imposed from both the outside and from within. Hoisting the Three-Self banner, stressing an independent self-governing church, and casting off the control and restraints of foreign mission agencies were basic conditions for changing the countenance of the Chinese church and establishing a sense of self-identity. Theological thought necessarily reflected this spirit. But this does not imply that we would always be isolated from the world church. The independent, self-governing Chinese church has already won the approval and respect of world Christianity. Our witness has had a positive impact all over the world. In order to enrich ourselves, we should draw beneficial experience from world Christianity...Under the open door and reform policies, the Chinese church has taken on a new stature as a part of the church universal, and as an active member of the world Christian family. This does not weaken our Three-Self consciousness, for it can even deepen and develop our Three-Self spirit. We should try to enrich ourselves by selectively absorbing some of the factors of the various theological currents and views which have emerged around the world over the last few decades, so that these may be reflected in our own theological construction.

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CCC/TSPM Executive Committee Meets in Shanghai, Proposes Specialized Committees 92.3.1
China Christian Council Publishes Large Character Bible 92.3.2
Recorded Sermons For New Christians 92.3.3
Shandong Church Holds Worship Service For The Elderly 92.3.4
New Church For Lisu Christians Established In Yunnan 92.3.5
Yunnan Churches Rebuilt After 1988 Earthquake 92.3.6
International Exchanges 92.3.7
ANS Documentation: "Religious Work Should Also Have Chinese Characteristics" (Translation) K.H. Ting's Address To The Fifth Session Of The Seventh CPPCC, 26 March, 1992 92.3.8


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CCC/TSPM Executive Committee Meets In Shanghai, Proposes Specialized Committees

The new Executive Committee of China's two national Christian organizations, the CCC and the TSPM, met in Shanghai in April to plan their work for the current year.

The committee evaluated the work of January's Fifth National Christian Conference, noting the excellent response of Chinese Christians to reports from the conference on "running the church well". The March issue of Tian Feng, the Chinese Protestant monthly, was a special issue on the conference, and more than 50,000 copies were sold. The Executive Committee concluded that the Chinese Church is facing a new situation, and expressed the belief that although the "burdens are heavy and the road is long," God would continue to guide them forward.

The Executive Committee also proposed the setting up of specialized committees, and submitted names to the Standing Committee of the two national Christian organizations for formal approval. Each committee has a chairperson, two or more vice-chairpersons, a secretary and ten or more members. The committees and chairpersons are as follows:

Church Administration Committee, chaired by Rev. Peter W.H. Cai, President of the Zhejiang Christian Council

Rural Work Committee, chaired by Rev. Zheng Yugui, President of the Fujian Christian Council

International Relations Committee, chaired by Dr. Wenzao Han, General Secretary of the Amity Foundation

Publications Committee, chaired by Mr. Luo Guanzong, Chairperson of the Shanghai Three-Self Committee

Bible Publication Committee, chaired by Sr. Jiang Peifen, President of the Jiangsu Christian Council

Sacred Music Committee, chaired by Bp. Stephen S.Y. Wang, President of the Shandong Christian Council

Theological Education Committee, chaired by Bp. Shen Yifan, Senior Pastor of Shanghai's Community Church

Tian Feng Editorial Committee, chaired by Bishop K.H. Ting

Bishop Ting and Mr. Luo Guanzong chaired the various sessions of the April meeting, in which seventeen leaders from the national CCC and TSPM took part. [ANS]
China Christian Council Publishes Large Character Bible

This Easter, the China Christian Council released the first copies of the newly published "Large Character Bible" in Shanghai.

In order to meet the needs of older Christians with poor eyesight, the Bible Publications Committee of the CCC arranged for the printing of the new Bible with the Amity Printing Company, Ltd. in Nanjing. On April 19th, two Shanghai churches held ceremonies during their Easter services to mark the publication of the new Bible. Elder Ren Zhongxiang and Rev. Shen Cheng'en, representing the Bible Publications Committee, presented copies of the new edition at Community Church and Mu'en Church. The fifty copies for sale at Mu'en Church were immediately sold out.

The China Christian Council has published almost seven million Bibles in various editions in the last decade, including more than four million since the Amity Press began operations in 1987. [ANS]

Recorded Sermons For New Christians

The China Christian Council has recently released a set of six cassette tapes of sermons for new Christians. Entitled "Chinese Christian Sermons for the Nurture of New Believers," the tapes are especially designed to meet the pastoral needs of China's rapidly growing Christian community. The sermons introduce Biblical faith in six areas: (1) The Lord of Creation; (2) The Omniscient and Omnipotent Father; (3) The God of Love and Justice; (4) The One True God; (5) Christ Comes into the World; and (6) The Cross of Christ. The sermons were written by some of China's outstanding preachers, and recorded by graduates of Nanjing Theological Seminary. [ANS]

Shandong Church Holds Worship Service For The Elderly

Tian Feng, the Chinese Protestant monthly, recently received a letter from a rural church worker in Yinan County, Shandong, about a worship service to honor the elderly in the congregation:

"We are a country church in a mountainous area, with a congregation drawn from eleven different villages. Before our [OVER]"
Shandong Church Holds Worship Service for the Elderly

Last year, the church deacons called a meeting and proposed that a service of worship be held to honor the older Christians in our congregation, and to express the respect and sense of filial piety which our church has for the elderly. This proposal was accepted by all, and the service was held last December 29. The choir opened the service with a hymn, and then, as the congregation welcomed the elderly with their applause, twenty church members above the age of 73 were escorted forward by the sisters in the choir, and each was presented with a bright red flower. Elder Lu Yuchang offered words of encouragement from the Bible, and explained that respect for the elderly is not only a virtue from the Chinese cultural tradition, but even more, it is a responsibility of Christians. In the service, young people learned how to be more respectful of their parents, in return for all that their parents had done in raising them. This would glorify God and serve humankind, and allow the elderly to understand God's great love, so that they could be comfortable in their later years and be well received both inside and outside the church. Worship concluded with a resounding hymn of thanks and praise. After the service, gifts were presented to the elderly, and a group photo was taken of the elderly and the choir.

"This was the first time we had this kind of service, and the congregation wanted to send the news to Tian Feng, so that it could be published and shared with brothers and sisters in China and around the world."

Tian Feng regularly receives letters from local congregations about their activities, many of which are published as a regular feature in the magazine. [ANS]

ANS 92.3.5

New Church for Lisu Christians Established in Yunnan

Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture in China's southwestern province of Yunnan is an area largely inhabited by the Lisu nationality. In this prefecture there are almost 100,000 Christians from the Lisu and other nationalities, who make up 20% of the population. Until earlier this year, there was no church in the area, and Christians worshipped in meeting points in neighboring villages. [OVER]
A few years ago, church leaders began a process of consultation with government officials to urge that land be set aside for a church in the prefecture’s main town. With the assistance of the CCC and the provincial government, Nujiang's Christians were able to establish both an office and a central church to serve the Christians of the prefecture. Although it is not large, the church is sufficient for local needs and can seat a congregation of 1,000 people. Now, in addition to the local meeting points, there is also the Nujiang Central Church.

Early one morning this past February, hymns from the church were broadcast through its loudspeakers, calling Christians from the mountains and valleys of the surrounding countryside. More than 2,000 church workers and lay people from throughout the prefecture gathered in the new Nujiang Central Church for a service of dedication and thanksgiving. The thirty-member youth choir, wearing white robes especially designed for this service, led the congregation into the sanctuary. Older pastors and elders from Nujiang led in the service, which was presided over by Ma Ke, the chairperson of the local Three-Self Committee.

China’s 480,000 Lisu people are found mainly in the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, and many of them are Christians. The China Christian Council has published 30,000 Lisu Bibles as a first step in meeting their needs for scriptures in their own language. Bibles in Chinese characters are also supplied for Yunnan Christians. [ANS]

Yunnan Churches Rebuilt After 1988 Earthquake

Christians in Yunnan’s Lancang Autonomous County have rebuilt forty-five churches since their area was hit by a strong earthquake on November 6, 1988.

Lancang, an autonomous county of the Lahu nationality which borders Burma in the far southwest of Yunnan Province, was at the epicenter of the earthquake. More than 66 church buildings were destroyed, causing an estimated loss of over 1.1 million yuan to the church.

The forty-five new church buildings were all opened before March, 1992. Construction costs totalled 270,000 yuan, 100,000 of which was covered by contributions from local churches and Christians, who also contributed 50,000 work days in labor. The remainder was donated by the Amity Foundation and by church organizations from around the country. [OVER]
Yunnan Churches Rebuilt After 1988 Earthquake/2

The 20,000 baptized Christians and seekers of Lancang have gone through an empowering experience in overcoming difficulties in a spirit of service and unity. On their behalf, the local TSPM has expressed its heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the people of China, to church organizations and to fellow Christians from around the world. Without this support, they said, the churches of Lancang "would not have been able to recover so quickly". [ANS]

International Exchanges

At the invitation of Australia's United Korean Women's Association, CCC Vice-President Rev. Wu Ai'en visited churches in several Australian cities. Accompanied by Rev. Chi Renhua, she preached in churches and attended conferences organized by Korean-Australian Christians in March and April. Revs. Wu and Chi are ethnic Korean women from China's northeastern province of Liaoning.

Archbishop and Mrs. Bertil Werkstrom, Bishop and Mrs. Jonas Jonson and three other delegates from the Church of Sweden visited China in early April, at the invitation of the CCC. They met with church leaders and spoke at worship services and seminars in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Hunan Province. In Hunan, they visited Yiyang, where the Church of Sweden formerly ran a church and mission school, and Changsha, where the Chinese church is currently involved in welfare projects.

McMaster University awarded Bishop K.H. Ting an honorary doctorate in theology on May 12th, at graduation exercises in Hamilton, Canada. Following his visit to churches in Canada, Bishop Ting went to the United States at the invitation of the National Council of Churches (U.S.A.), to meet with church leaders and attend related meetings.

Students, faculty and board members from Columbia Seminary in the USA visited Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing in May, in order to learn about the witness of the Chinese Church and its role in society. They met with students, theologians and church leaders in each city, and made plans to visit China again next year.

Dr. and Mrs. Carl Mau visited China in April and May, at the invitation of the China Christian Council. Dr. Mau, former General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, lectured at churches and seminaries in several Chinese cities, where he also met with theological students and church leaders. [ANS]
In his government work report, Premier Li Peng has indicated that ours is a socialism with Chinese characteristics. Chinese socialist construction is to become increasingly suited to the concrete situation in China. This is what struck me most in the government's work report.

Are Chinese characteristics also reflected in religious work in China? I believe they are, though unevenly so. I cannot give a complete and systematic picture of Chinese characteristics in religious work, but I would like to share with you four examples:

1. Chairman Mao often instructed us not to put blind faith in administrative measures in dealing with matters involving the masses' religious faith. It must be said that this is the most treasured experience and the most significant lesson of over forty years of religious work. By stressing this point in our work, we can avoid much that would be damaging to relations between the masses and the party as well as many wrong turnings.

2. Premier Zhou Enlai firmly maintained that the Chinese Communist Party should not adopt a line of struggling against religion from the outside or of attempting to hasten its demise. He advocated the vigorous implementation of the policy of religious freedom, and to develop the strength of healthy elements within religion and make religious people into friends of the party and government, so that, in the area of politics and in the construction of a socialist nation, they might be of one heart and one mind with the party, while they would feel free in religious terms to govern themselves and run their religions well. This would have the effect of broadening unity day by day, as well as of shrinking the market for counter-revolutionary forces both at home and abroad, thus isolating bad elements so that the government could deal with them through the dictatorship of the proletariat. Rather than sympathizing with the bad elements, the masses would then support the government.

3. In the 1950s, United Front Director Li Weihan applied the principle of seeking truth from facts in summing up the five characteristics of religion in China: these are its mass character, its ethnic character, its international character, its complex character and its protracted character. This was of great significance in guiding religious work. There is no comparison between it and those who during the "Cultural Revolution" criticized these five characteristics as revisionist and painted religion as having only two characteristics: anti-revolutionary and fraudulent.

4. In 1952, Central Committee "Document Number 19" on religion summarized the changes which had taken place in religion in China over thirty years, and assessed the political situation in Chinese religious circles. This document made a more complete exposition of the significance and principles of religion than any past government document had done. It pointed out that:

"... we must understand that it will be fruitless and extremely harmful to use simple coercion in dealing with the people's ideological and spiritual questions - this includes religious questions. ... At the present historical stage, the difference that exists between the mass of believers and nonbelievers in matters of ideology and belief is relatively secondary. If we one-sidedly exaggerate this difference, even to the point of giving it primary importance - for example, by discriminating against and attacking the mass of religious believers, while neglecting or denying that the basic political and economic welfare of the mass of both religious believers and nonbelievers is the same - then we forget that the party's basic task is to unite all the people (which includes the broad mass of believers and nonbelievers alike) to strive to construct a modern, powerful socialist state. To behave otherwise would only exacerbate the differences between the mass of believers and nonbelievers, and incite and aggravate religious fanaticism, resulting in serious consequences for our socialist enterprise."

It further points out: "... the basic starting point and firm foundation for our handling of the religious question and for the implementation of our policy and freedom of religious belief lies in our desire to unite the mass of believers and nonbelievers and enable them to center their will and strength on the common goal of building a modernized, powerful socialist state."

The four preceding points exemplify the Chinese characteristics of the guiding ideology behind religious work in China. There is a common point: none take as either their starting point or their goal a struggle against religion. All are based on the concept of unifying with the mass of religious believers, and all see religious believers as part of the great body of the Chinese people.

The believing masses and religious organizations are in no sense at
odds with other sectors in China. These two groups are not in contention with or
struggling against other groups in China. Their view is also one of sharing weal and woe
with the larger community. As far as I know, not only do they deny the view of unbridled
mutual antagonism between church and state in a socialist country, a view which is held by
some people in the west; their view is also completely different from that of some former
socialist nations which hold that religion is an alien, almost adversarial affair. The
facts tell us that when the masses wish to believe in religion, the result of taking
struggle as the guiding ideology can only be to sadden one's own people while gladdening
the enemy. But if we follow the spirit of Chairman Mao, Premier Zhou, Director Li and
"Document 19" in our religious work, then we will not see the party, people, nation and
government on one side, and religion, churches and believers on another, as two mutually
antagonistic camps. Instead we will realize that they have a common goal: making our
nation, rich, strong and prosperous. If we can maintain the distinctive differences of
religious believers and religious activities within our overall unity, then reconciliation
and unity are entirely within our grasp.

Administrative measures have specific uses in specific circumstances, and they
generally need to be avoided. If we rely entirely or even primarily upon such measures,
strains will inevitably be created in relations between party and masses, the
party's power to hold the people together will be weakened, the nation's image will be
damaged, and our enemies will benefit at the expense of social stability and unity.

What other measures or paths are there,
in addition to administrative measures, which
we can use in dealing with religious questions
among the masses? I believe the most important is also one which has Chinese
characteristics. This is nothing other than the promotion of self-government within each
religion. This means establishing and strengthening patriotic religious
organizations so that, under the party's line
and guiding policies, they can fully develop
their role and solve most problems as they
arise. These organizations must both strive
to raise the level of their adherents' political thinking, making them patriotic
supporters of the party and socialism, and
also strive to run the religions well and satisfy the masses of religious believers,
thereby strengthening our cohesiveness. We
know that if we have only a slap-dash understanding of the grassroots religious
situation, we will inevitably treat everyone
just the same. This leads to dissatisfaction among the believers. But if the patriotic
religious organizations establish broad linkages with all religious believers, they
will be able to understand the facts of each
situation, they will be more thorough in their work, and they will do a better job of
differentiating their treatment of different
groups. This in itself is no small thing.

Another example: In some places,
especially in rural village areas, there has been an unusual increase in the number of
Christians, but the educational level and understanding of the faith of these Christians
is rather low. The facts show that such
unusual growth has taken place in areas where
the influence of patriotic Christian
organizations is not very great. Such places are easy targets for illegal activities or
infiltration by groups from overseas. However, the patriotic Christian organizations' call to
run the church well according to the three-
self principle will help to strengthen supervision, control abnormal growth and
resist illegal activities and overseas
infiltration. It is clear that patriotic religious organizations with a solid mass
base, through their unique religious links and perspectives, have a role to play and can
prove effective where other methods cannot.

Patriotic religious organizations are
the party's bridges to the masses. Bridges
must be firmly anchored at both ends. These organizations must not be wrongly seen by the
believers to be government appointed
organizations. They are the believers' mass
organizations, they must maintain close links
with the broad masses of believers and be well
versed in the believers' faith, thought and
feelings. They must have a good grasp of what
is and is not acceptable behavior so that they
can deal with problems more smoothly and
without arousing antagonism.

In order to be able to play such a
role, our religious organizations must
strengthen themselves organizationally, which
involves trusting and making use of more
people. In the case of Protestantism, the
number of adherents has increased from several
hundred thousand to several million, but the
responsible people in local areas are mostly
old and infirm and it is difficult for them to
play a very big role. In fact among these
several million there is certainly no lack of
people who love their country and love the
church, who are intelligent and able and who
can be called upon to play useful roles. So
as to unite the broad mass of believers,
religious organizations must not detest or
reject those who stress their love of
religion, in order to save themselves trouble.
These faith-loving people are precisely the
one who have support among the masses. We
must give them due importance and unite with
them through our work. Then not only will
their own patriotic consciousness be raised
step by step, but they will draw many
believers into the patriotic religious
organizations. For the past thirty or forty
years, because we have not fully recognized
the tremendous role religious organizations
and religious personalities can play, and due to
our closed door tendencies, we have either
set aside or used in a very limited [OVER]
Chinese Characteristics/2

way, people who are familiar with religion, people who could make a very great contribution to uniting the mass of religious believers and isolating counter-revolutionary forces. Instead the government has increasingly used administrative measures in our work.

There are three contingents of people involved in religious work: government religious affairs departments, those involved in theoretical research and the social-scientific study of religion, and the patriotic organizations of the separate religions. The latter play a unique role which no other organization can supplant in running their own religious affairs well, in working for unity and stability among their adherents, in undertaking education in patriotism, in resisting infiltration, in opposing illegal activities, in mobilizing the masses of religious believers for socialist construction, and in running the church. It is my hope that the patriotic organizations of each religion can, with the support of the party and the government, become both nation-loving and religion-loving organizations with an abundant mass base, and take running their respective religions well as their own responsibilities. If this can be put into practice, the Chinese characteristics of the line in religious work set forth by Chairman Mao and other leading comrades, will come a step closer to realization, and we will be able to unite with even more religious believers in the future, as we work together for the socialist cause. This will mean the liberation and development of greater productive forces for our nation.
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