Does The Chinese Church Need To Protect Its Independence Today?

(ANS) At a time when China as a whole was freeing itself from overseas control, the National Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement was born in the 1950s and succeeded in placing sovereignty over the Chinese Church squarely in Chinese hands. Chinese believers themselves took on the task of administering and financing the church, and of evangelizing within China. Now, almost 50 years later, China has entered a phase of "reform and opening to the outside world." Given the current climate of openness and greater contacts with overseas churches, Xin Jian asks in February's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, whether the church in China still needs to maintain its Three-Self principles and its independence today.

Xin recalls how difficult it was for the church in China to rid itself of its "foreign" image and control in the past. Overseas mission boards often made use of their financial advantages to bully and humiliate poorer and weaker countries, including China. This meant that overseas churches supplied most of the money, resources and personnel for the church in China before Liberation, and authority within the church rested in foreigners' hands. Even as late as the 1950s, those missionaries still living in China were still using the threat of the withdrawal of financial support to try and bully Chinese believers into not supporting the new Three-Self initiative.
Xin notes how it is very easy nowadays for younger church workers and new converts to be unaware of the pain and humiliation of having the church controlled by foreigners before Liberation. Especially in poorer areas, many young church workers only look to securing financial gain for their church and do not consider the cost of their actions when they go begging to overseas churches. In some parts of China now, the daily expenses and the salaries of church workers are almost entirely dependent on contributions from overseas groups. In such places, as soon as foreigners turn up, the church invites them to preach or teach or establish links, without even stopping to enquire into the visitors' backgrounds or motives. Through such actions, church workers are throwing the many gains of the past few decades into serious jeopardy.

Now that China is opening up, many overseas groups are once again using financial means to try and manipulate the church in China. These groups use the fact that many churches in China are still poor and lacking in church workers as an excuse for launching a campaigns to flood China with their own workers and teachings. Some groups even go so far as drawing up ambitious plans to set up some form of national "alternative" church structure to supplant the church already established in China.

By way of an example, Xin explains in his article how churches overseas often plan their work in China with little or no consultation with Chinese believers themselves. One overseas church recently drew up plans to donate a huge sum of money toward building a seminary in a remote Chinese province. However, the group's own magazine talked of this project as "our seminary in China". The group wanted total control over the whole project, including the design of the buildings, the appointment of the board of directors, the hiring of teaching staff and the content of courses, including the option to regularly send its own personnel to teach at the new seminary. Is this an example of "unconditional sharing" in the Lord, Xin asks?

Many groups send their missionaries to China under false pretences in the guise of businessmen, teachers or overseas students. These missionaries enter China and then seek to establish networks among the local population of believers in order to disseminate their messages. Recruits are trained to travel from place to place preaching the message that "all who join churches linked with the Three-Self Movement cannot be saved." They also stir up debates about "Believers versus Unbelievers" in an attempt to attack local government authorities, instructing people to "listen only to God and not to mere unbelieving human beings."

Even after establishing its independence, Xin notes that keeping sovereignty over its own affairs has proven very difficult for the Chinese church. This is largely because many overseas political groups seek to use Christianity as a means of achieving their political aims of "Westernizing China" and "Smashing Socialism". As Xin reports, support overseas for the rights of the Chinese church to manage its own affairs is constantly growing. Nevertheless, there are still many "anti-China" church groups who dismiss the Chinese church's right to independence and still work hard at their brand of old style "infiltrate China" evangelism. Xin reports how many Bible smugglers pass out their own propaganda material along with Bibles, containing messages such
as "We can defeat Communism in China just as we did in Russia and Eastern Europe" and "Put the final nail in the coffin of Communism." In such a way, the church and Christianity in China is in real danger of becoming a mere pawn of overseas anti-China politics.

Xin reminds readers that the right of churches to independence and self-determination is a Biblical principle. At the time of the Apostles, there was no model of any one church controlling another church. Each church had its own organization, structures and finances, whilst at the same time having contact with each other and mutually supporting each other on an equal basis (see Acts 11:29-30, 12:25). From this it can be understood that, when the church in China was in the hands of overseas mission boards, it was in an "abnormal" and "unbalanced" state. Hence, Xin observes, the Three-Self Movement was necessary to restore the situation in line with God's word. Now, God has chosen to place the Chinese church at this present time in a society in the first stages of Socialism. It is up to Chinese believers themselves to find a way to move forward within this reality, evangelizing and witnessing to those around them under God's own guidance.

Xin concludes that independence and self-determination do not mean closing the doors to outside contacts and help. The church in China is part of the church universal with Christ as its head. As such, the Chinese church is willing to expand its overseas contacts on a basis of equality and respect. Many churches and overseas groups have indeed already given the Chinese church much unconditional support and help. But, as CCC President Dr. Wenzao Han has pointed out, this help needs to be done according to Chinese believers' needs, in an open, honest and legal way, and with such help being given under the supervision of the Chinese church itself. As Han stresses, the Chinese church especially opposes those who follow some kind of "Two Track" approach to work in China (see ANS 97.11.1) and also those who want to use Christianity in order to threaten China itself. [1164 words]

98.3.2

Everyone's Talking About Church Building!

(ANS) Since the end of the Cultural Revolution the church in China has entered a phase of building itself up again. This is reflected today in the number of church buildings being constructed, renovated or restored. According to rough estimates, three new church buildings are completed somewhere in China every two days. In February's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, church workers from all over the country pool their experiences of church building over the past few years and give some practical advice for congregations looking to construct their own church buildings in the future.

Guo Sanshun from Wuzhi in Hunan province tells of one church where the number of new believers was rising so fast that they urgently needed a new church building to accommodate the growing congregation. Believers made great sacrifices to

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collect together the estimated 300,000 yuan (=US$ 36,245 approx.), even skimping on food, selling eggs, or going without medical treatment so as to donate. However, when fitting the interior of the new church, those responsible demanded the most luxurious furnishings, the highest quality electrical equipment and the most extravagant decorations. Guo stresses that the main purpose for building the new church was not for believers to appreciate the decorations or the lighting or to be impressed with an "out-of-this-world" sound system but primarily to have room enough for all believers to worship. When so many believers make great sacrifices to contribute toward church building, when many believers are in great need in their daily lives, and when churches in poor areas cannot even afford to construct any building of their own, Guo believes it is necessary for congregations to be prudent in church construction. Congregations should not go overboard or waste any of the "widows' mites" that have been contributed toward church construction work.

In a similar manner, Feng Yizhong of Shaowu in Fujian province, talks of a "Tear Down" fever which is gripping some parts of the church today. He mentions that many congregations observe new magnificent churches being built and therefore become gripped by a compulsion to tear down their own perfectly adequate buildings in order to compete and build something even grander of their own. Sometimes, in such churches, so much attention is given to constructing an opulent and luxurious church building that church workers actually neglect their pastoral duties toward their congregations. As a result, when such buildings are finished, they are certainly very grand and luxurious but they are also half-empty, as young and middle-aged believers especially become disillusioned by the attitude of the church and decide to look elsewhere for spiritual nourishment.

On the other hand, Hui Guofang from Yixing in Jiangsu Province tells of how some churches in the countryside fall into the trap of overlooking the quality of the construction work when churches are built. As a result, some buildings develop serious cracks in their structure after only one year of use. The cost of making the building safe for believers could subsequently be more than some congregations can afford, forcing churches to run up huge debts in repairs and thus have no spare funds for other essential church work for many years thereafter.

When it comes to the design of new church buildings, Ming Guang from Shanghai reminds us that the style of the building is a statement to the surrounding community of what a church stands for. Ming notes that many congregations painstakingly try to copy old-style traditional western Gothic designs when they construct new churches. Such churches incorporate many elaborate and ornate features, such as curved ceilings, spires and spikes, belfries etc., which are impractical and yet cost a lot of money. Ming mentions that there is a particular trend in the Chinese church at the moment to build what look like sky rockets on top of churches. Ming believes all this is wasteful and unnecessary and gives a bad witness to the local community, making churches look like castles or fortresses. He believes that designs should be simple, straightforward, modern and practical.
Huang Tianzhong from Nanping in Fujian province believes that churches need to support each other in church building efforts, as some places are still very poor and cannot afford to construct a place to worship on their own. Huang cites cases of pastors receiving letters from other areas asking for donations toward church building. Often, these pastors feel they cannot contribute anything to help other congregations, as their own church finances are so tight. So, the pastors tend to file away such requests and do nothing about them. Huang believes rather that such requests should be shared with the whole congregation, so that individual believers can decide whether they can contribute something to help or not, and can thus choose to share their support with believers in poorer areas. As Huang comments, many overseas missionaries went to remote and poor locations before Liberation and built churches in these places. These churches are still being used in those places but are now old and crumbling. Now that the Chinese church is independent of outside help, Huang wonders why it is proving so difficult for Chinese believers themselves to help their fellow Chinese in need?

Finally, Chen Zhu'en from Shaoxing in Zhejiang province warns churches to get their accounting systems in order before they start any fund raising for church construction projects. Chen reminds us that the temptation to embezzle funds cannot be ruled out even within church circles, as the example of Judas in the Gospels teaches us (see John12:6). By having an open, transparent and thorough accounting system, the church can safeguard the building work and avoid corruption within its membership. In many churches, the accounting system is not thorough and it is thus easy not to notice if the building fund is short a few thousand yuan. [983 words]

**Chronic Poverty Holds The Church Back In Guizhou Province**

(ANS) Guizhou province in the southwest of China, one of the remotest and poorest places in the whole country, has an estimated 360,000 believers, half of whom have never yet been baptized. The main problem for the church in this area and the reason for the delay in baptisms, as in other rural communities, is a chronic lack of personnel and resources. Last November, three members of the Rural Affairs Committee of the China Christian Council from Nanjing travelled to Guiyang, the provincial capital of Guizhou to attend a much needed 12-day church worker training course there. February's issue of *Tian Feng*, the magazine of the Chinese church, reports on the situation of the church during the visitors' stay in Guizhou.

In some remote mountainous areas of Guizhou province, due to the lack of church workers, some believers have not only not received baptism but those who have been baptized have also not received communion for many years. Of the province's nine major cities, only the provincial capital, Guiyang, and another city, Liu Pan Shui, have established municipal Christian Councils and TSPM committees. 80% of the province's believers still live below the poverty line, with an average annual income of less than 220 yuan (=US$26 approx.). Most believers in Guizhou province are farmers but because the earth in this part of China is impoverished, one year's harvest only yields enough to eat for half a year.

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As a result of the conditions of extreme poverty in most areas of the province, it is virtually impossible for grassroots churches to support the living expenses of church workers. Hence congregations have no-one to pastor them and many fall prey to various heretical teachings and sects. All the major sects operating throughout China are active in the province, and the "Disciples" sect (Mentuhui) in particular is said to have recruited 100,000 members already by donating much needed funds to churches and then tricking the believers in these churches with their false teachings.

Therefore, the need to train church workers is at the moment particularly pressing in Guizhou. During the training course last November, 33 students between the ages of 29 and 72 took part, although the number of people who came to the classes to listen to the teaching far outnumbered the regular students. The main four-storey church in Guiyang served as classroom and dormitory, with teachers and materials for the course being donated by the Guiyang Christian Council.

During the course, participants expressed their view that it is vital to build a strong leadership team at the provincial CCF/TSPM committee level. However, the leadership of this committee has stayed the same for many years. Out of a total of nine leaders appointed to this committee several years earlier, two have passed away, three are over 80 years of age and one is too weak to carry out any work now. None of the three younger and able-bodied remaining members of the committee live in the provincial capital Guiyang and have no means to move there. Because of this situation, it is very difficult to develop and coordinate the work of the provincial Christian council in any systematic way. For the whole of the province there is only one younger church worker who struggles to deal with the day-to-day business of the committee. Fortunately, during the training course, discussions were held concerning setting up a meeting in the near future to elect a new and stronger provincial church leadership structure.

Over the past ten years, the church in Guizhou has sent dozens of young people to seminaries around China for training. However, following graduation, many of these do not return to serve the Guizhou church. Some do not want to see their education "wasted" by returning to the church in their home province. Others would willingly serve the church in Guizhou but find that the church there simply cannot meet their living expenses, so they have to abandon their church work and look for employment elsewhere. One recent graduate only earns 70-120 yuan (=US$8-14 approx.) per month doing a part-time job and then 60 yuan (=US$7 approx.) on top of that working part-time for the church. In this way he barely manages to make ends meet but at least is able to serve the church to a certain extent. This graduate is in danger of losing his part-time job due to low profits and therefore the threat of lay-offs at the factory he works for. If this happens, he will have no choice but to leave the church to look for a way to make a living elsewhere.

A further difficulty facing the church in this remote province is the "Leftist" slant of many grassroots Religious Affairs Bureau cadres. Many of these cadres are not acquainted with developments in religious policy and still hold that religion per se is a
bad thing. Some discriminate against Christians, only allowing Buddhism to be practised in areas under their jurisdiction. When believers in these areas take out pictures from Tian Feng showing national Party leaders meeting with church officials thus proving the legality of their religion, the local cadres brush these aside, saying that the pictures could be fakes. Provincial Religious Affairs leaders are working hard to carry out assessments of local cadres to make sure that they understand and implement religious policy correctly and even receive instruction in the basics of the faith. [924 words]

"Scattered Sheep" On The Yellow Earth Of Shaanxi

(ANS) Jia county lies among the yellow earth plateaus and ravines in the northern part of Shaanxi province. In this part of the world, the earth is poor and barren, natural resources are few, communication with the outside world is difficult and the area is virtually inaccessible to most modes of transportation. For thousands of years now, the people of Jia county have been trying their best to eke out an existence in this region, coaxing the barren yellow earth to produce enough food to keep body and soul together. God has not overlooked this area - the Gospel was brought to Jia county over a century ago and at that time a sizeable portion of the local population showed interest and came to faith. However, the situation in the church today is bleak and desolate, with believers few and far between. Recently, Li Shizheng visited this remote region to find out why the church there is declining, reporting on his findings in January's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church.

The population of Jia county is 220,000, but only a little over 1,000 are known to be believers. Christians are definitely in a minority in the area and are viewed as "strange" and "curious" by most of the local population. Some local people even look down on believers in the county and cold-shoulder them, seeing their beliefs as a symptom of ignorance and superstition. When he visited, Li could see temples and shrines all over the county, but not a single church building. Encountering such prejudices gave Li a strong understanding of why it is so difficult for the small group of believers in Jiayuan to make any headway in spreading the Gospel.

Despite the harsh conditions in the region, believers try their best to continue worshipping together and spreading the Christian message wherever they can. Believers have no church building and no fixed meeting point at the moment, usually meeting in each others' homes on a rotating basis. These homes are often little more than earth cave dwellings. The lack of a fixed meeting point for believers adds to the instability of the church situation in the county, Li reports.

Li points out that the main problem in the Jia county church is not so much the lack of a meeting point but the lack of pastoral workers and leadership within the church. Throughout the whole county, pastoral duties fall to one 80-year old believer, assisted by only two lay workers who have received theological college training. Apart
from these three, there are no other church workers in Jia county, and certainly no structures in place for carrying out church work in a systematic or regular way. Li discovered that this state of affairs has led to situations where many very old believers have still not even been baptized. Even many who have been baptized have no chance of receiving communion from one year to the next. In the remotest areas within the county the believers cannot even organize regular Sunday services and make do with a couple of hymns and a prayer, lasting no more than 20 minutes altogether. Li points out that the formal educational level of most of the local population in Jiayuan is low or non-existent, meaning that it is difficult for believers to organize themselves without any help or leadership.

Li visited remote Zhaiqu village in Jiayuan county and spoke with one believer now in his seventies. This man told Li that his village used to have over one hundred believers but, because of the lack of pastoral workers and support, he was now the only believer left in that village, and after he was gone there would be no-one.

As if their problems were not already enough, heresy has also found a way to infiltrate the small group of believers in Jia county. Heretical groups which have been active in other parts of China have also found their way to Jia county in the past, such as the "Yellers" sect and the "Disciples" sect. At present, members of another sect are active in the area. This group preaches that they are the "new branches" on the vine of Christ and that only those who also become "new branches" on the vine like them can enter the kingdom of heaven. This group teaches that all other believers are "old branches" which have no life in them any more, and the "new branches" have come to supplant the "old" ones. Adherents of this sect infiltrate believers' meetings in Jia county and also visit believers in their homes, and some have even caused local believers to change their beliefs and join the sect. Li discovered that this particular sect appears to be motivated by profit alone, as all believers who agree to become "new branches" have to pay a certain "fee" to enter the so-called true "church". Such actions are certainly against the law, and local Public Security officials are now investigating such incidents.

Li concludes that what this remote part of God's church needs most is leadership and guidance. He likens the believers in Jia county to sheep which can wander off in all directions with nobody to look after them, search for them or bring them back to the fold. It is, as the prophet Ezekial said, "They are scattered abroad for want of a shepherd." (Ezekial 34:5). [912 words]
"Being One" Does Not Mean "Total Integration"

(ANS) The essence of China's policy on religion today is that of freedom of religious faith, meaning that people are free to believe or not to believe in any religion they choose. In February's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Liao Shui from Shanghai argues that this policy also includes the right to follow the practices of any one group or denomination within any one particular religion. In a response to an article in Tian Feng in October last year, attacking the resurgence of denominationalism in the Chinese church (see ANS 97.11.3), Liao counters that believers would actually do better to accept and embrace their differences rather than seeking to stamp them out entirely.

Liao argues that, in the past, the Chinese church has confused the existence of different denominations with what the Bible talks about "divisions" among believers. Liao believes that there is a difference between the two: "divisions" refers to when people do things not for the benefit of the church but purely for the benefit of themselves or their own particular group. However, Liao believes that denominations arise naturally as scientific, economic and social systems change and develop, producing new ideas and thus new understandings of the Christian faith among different believers. Furthermore, when the Gospel spreads to different areas and is combined with the culture and traditions of that area, it naturally results in a new understanding and practice of the faith there to that practised by other groups elsewhere. Liao does not see the emergence of such groups as negative, but rather sees them as revitalizing and challenging the church to move with the times and to examine itself and how it expresses what it stands for.

Liao believes that many confuse the "being one" of the Bible with trying to force all believers to worship and express their faith in exactly the same way, and with the "extermination" of any and all denominational practices. Liao notes that "being one" should not be understood as "total integration", meaning the complete eradication of all differences. In Liao's view, "being one" means recognizing the basic beliefs of "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God", which all believers hold to be true. However, Liao maintains that Christianity needs to look at many different ways of exploring and responding to these basic truths in order to understand them better and bring them to a wider cross-section of society.

Denominations do not necessarily have to produce divisions and discord. Within the Church Universal, there have been occasions too numerous to mention through the years where believers holding different understandings of the faith nevertheless support and help each other because of that which they do have in common. If all believers are working to understand and follow Jesus' teaching then Liao believes that splits and discord will not arise. In his view, it is only when people are seeking their own personal gain or glory that damage is done.
Liao stresses that he does not wish to see a return to the denominationalism of the past within the Chinese church. However, he does believe that the church in China needs to relax its thinking on differences within its ranks and make a conscientious effort to tolerate and respect different understandings and expressions of the one common faith which all its members share. [565 words]

ANS Feature:

Excerpts From The Letter Page Of Tian Feng

The letters to the editors of the Chinese church magazine, Tian Feng, give readers a glimpse of daily church life with all its joys and problems. To give our readers an idea of the breadth and width of the issues discussed, we are documenting here questions and answers from the January and February issues of the church magazine.

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Can The Elements Of Holy Communion Be Taken Home?

To the editors:

The service of Holy Communion is often celebrated in the church. When it comes to the time to receive the bread and the wine, many believers who travel far to church ask for an extra portion of the Communion elements to take home with them. They want to give them to other believers back home who are too old, weak, ill or busy to make it to church. Our church is now in the midst of a controversy about this - some say it is okay, others not. Could you please tell us what to do in this kind of situation?

-- Mu Zhenfu, Yunnan Province

Response:

Through Holy Communion we remember first and foremost the work of salvation which the Lord completed for us. At the same time, when receiving the bread and the cup together with other believers, we demonstrate that we are all one in Christ. Therefore believers must try their best to participate in Communion and receive the renewal of spiritual life that it brings. Ordinarily, the bread and the wine of Communion shouldn't be taken outside the place of worship. This is in accordance with the teaching of 1 Corinthians 11:27-34, where we learn that the first requirement for receiving Communion is an "understanding of the sacrament" (i.e. its meaning and how it should be celebrated). The second requirement is a "self-examination" of one's own sins. The third is a "recognition" that we are receiving the Lord's body. Therefore, Communion must be approached seriously - if it is taken home, these requirements may not be met. In particular, some people without knowledge of these matters may end up putting the Communion elements to wrong uses, such as using them as a kind of charm to bless and protect family members or as some form of healing medication.

Having said all this, for those who truly cannot make it to the celebration of Communion in the church itself, a certain tradition does exist. In these cases, lay church workers may take the elements prepared in the Communion service to the person's home. In this way that person can commemorate our Lord by receiving Communion at home.
Can We Pray In Places That Are "Unclean"?

To the editors:

We come from a rural area and there is no central burial place here, so this means there are burial sites scattered all over the surrounding countryside. There are some evangelists here who tell believers that burial sites are "unclean" places, so we cannot pray there (meaning silent prayer and meditation). They also say that toilets are filthy places, and we cannot pray there either. I would think that if believers suddenly have a stomach ache while on the toilet, they can surely call on God, can't they? How are we to understand this? It is very common here for believers to say that, once you believe in God, you cannot do this and you mustn't do that, and so it is very difficult to know what to do to keep a clear conscience in such matters. We look forward to your reply.

--Wang Lin, Anhui Province

Response:

This problem hangs on the question of how we are to understand Old Testament teaching. There are some believers who have introduced all kinds of man-made restrictions into their daily lives because they do not have a complete understanding of the Bible.

In the Old Testament there are many rules about cleanliness, such as requirements about a person's body, food and drink, the environment, and other aspects of life. There are also regulations concerning when certain people and certain places can be said to be "unclean." In later Old Testament times, the practice of whitewashing tombs was introduced to prevent people stumbling on to them unintentionally. However, the main point of the Law was for the Israelites to learn and reflect within their daily lives the importance of being set apart as holy and of living holy, devout and pure lives (See passages such as Leviticus 11-15). Today these written laws have now been replaced by the New Testament: Christians live by the grace of the Lord Jesus and can only be counted righteous and holy through the precious blood of Christ. Romans 7:6 says, "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." This Biblical passage is very important in explaining the fundamental difference between the New Testament and the Old Testament. Christians certainly should lead clean and holy lives and show themselves as holy through their witness to others. However, we shouldn't use the "old way" to follow the Lord. We shouldn't require ourselves to live by the rules which God made for the Israelites. The Apostle Paul condemned those in his time who, although they believed in the Lord, still observed the law. He said, "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'" (Colossians 2:20-21). Christian holiness and cleanliness is located in the heart and from there finds its expression on the outside. If someone is only clean and holy on the outside and their heart has not been born again and washed clean with the precious blood of Christ then this is of no use (see Titus 1:15). The Pharisees' behaviour was that of (see Matthew 23) focusing on the old ways, the written word and attaining righteousness through their own efforts. For these reasons, they were reproached by the Lord Jesus and we should take note of this ourselves.

Regarding places for prayer and meditation, the Lord Jesus' teaching similarly places emphasis on having a right spirit and lays down no restrictions as to location. The Bible teaches us to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints..." (Ephesians 6:18). If we offer sincere prayers from our heart then God will be with us, wherever we are, and will draw near to hear our prayers.
ANS Feature:

Chinese Theology and Its Cultural Sources

In an attempt to introduce readers to some of the theological thinking and debates within the church in China, ANS is featuring a series of articles by theologians in the Chinese church. The following is an article by Wang Weifan, Professor of Biblical Studies and Chinese Theology at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, as well as a poet and popular author of devotional literature. This essay is the preface from Rev. Wang's forthcoming book-length study, Chinese Culture and its Cultural Sources. It is reprinted here with permission from volume 11:2 of the Chinese Theological Review.

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There are four essential conditions for the establishment of Chinese theological thinking for the church in China: revelation, tradition, culture, praxis and experience. Like four pillars, these support the edifice that is a (Chinese) theology with Chinese characteristics. The Christian Church in China, especially the Protestant Church, has its historical roots in American revivalism and European pietism. The Reformation principle of sola Scriptura has never gone out of fashion in China. Divergent views never get further than seminary classrooms. This means that any view not founded on the revelation of God or "footnoted" on Biblical authority will be theologically unacceptable to the Chinese Church. A theology that is out of touch with the Chinese Church or unacceptable to the Christian community in China can hardly be considered a "Chinese theology." Chinese Christians may accept a theology which is somewhat above their intellectual level or one which contains notions not entirely within their understanding, but they will flatly reject one which contains anything "heretical" (that is, against their "received tradition").

To speak of a "Chinese theology" in no way implies a distancings from or a rejection of the rich spiritual heritage which has accrued through the centuries since the time of the Apostolic Church. However, just as we do not reject anything blindly, neither do we accept indiscriminately. "To copy without creating something of one's own" is unacceptable on two counts. First, reiterating what our forebears or others have said (about the gospel) is not enough. We must be able to absorb from what is received that which will be beneficial to the building up of a Chinese theology. Failure to create something new is complacency and stagnation, and leads nowhere. The northern Song scholar and poet Su Dongpo (Su Tungp'o, 1037-1101), said in appraisal of the Tang artist Wu Daozi: He "brings out the new from within the old." Likewise, a Chinese theology must have continuity with the faith and doctrines that have been passed on through the apostolic tradition while producing its own new and creative theological thinking, a theology which disappoints neither our forebears nor the expectations of the Church universal.

Theology is a form of theory. Like any other theory, theology is derived from practice. Again, like any other theory, theology can serve to guide future practice, in this case the faith and spiritual practice of both the church and individual Christians. And the practice and experience of Chinese Christianity is perhaps unique in the world. The fortunes of Christianity in China have undergone a series of ups and downs seldom seen in Christian history; in the Tang (618-907) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties, in the late Ming (1368-1644), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the 1950s, and most recently in its death during and rebirth after the Cultural Revolution. From this practice and experience, we must extract the riches of theological thinking which can be refined into a theology with Chinese characteristics. This Chinese theology will guide the Chinese Church and Chinese believers through the process of modernization in China and will make a fitting gift to the Church worldwide.

When the revelation of God and the gospel of Christ enters a particular culture, it must "put on" the flesh of this culture. People nurtured in this culture will understand and interpret the gospel
and revelation in terms of the philosophical, ethical and religious concepts of that culture, and these will differ from the standpoint of theologians from another culture. Thus we can say that while the basic faith and tenets of Christianity do not vary, (Christian) theology does. The former stands firm through the vicissitudes of time; the latter varies with time and place.

Among the cultures of the ancient world, only the Chinese culture endured five thousand years unbroken, its many sources to be found in the various schools of thought from pre-Qin times (221-207 BCE) to the early years of the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220). In terms of cultural geography, China is a landlocked "Middle Kingdom," which has been blessed with cultural stability. From the point of view of holistic ecology, the various schools of thought have complemented each other, bringing life and vitality to the Chinese tradition down the centuries. The spirit found in the concepts of zhong (middle, in balance) and he (harmonious) are intrinsic to the culture, serving as its strength (superiority) lies in its ability to assimilate and absorb other cultures without this assimilation affecting it at deeper levels. Chinese Chan (Zen) Buddhism, for example, no longer conforms to its original Buddhist form; and the number of Christians in China has never exceeded six per cent of the population. The former of these two facts shows that for a religion to establish itself in China, it must transform itself into a religion with Chinese cultural characteristics, while the latter shows that Christianity faces immense difficulty in wedging itself into a cultural framework that has been fixed for five thousand years.

Chinese culture has faced three very serious challenges in the last hundred years. The first, that of the May Fourth Movement (1919), set traditional Chinese culture and morality in opposition to democracy and science. Radical young people of the time denounced and rejected tradition, chanting "Down with Confucianism." However, this was a hasty, unexamined rejection, such that T.C. Chao (Zhao Zichen) later commented: "The old ethics were cast aside, along with the spirit that informed them. The Chinese virtues of loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness were jettisoned in favor of a retrograde revolutionism. Even the determination, struggle and moral fiber, the tears and blood, behind the tradition were all discarded in one fell swoop . . . . The New Thought Movement has yet to make a real contribution to moral reconstruction in China." The second challenge came in the shape of the Cultural Revolution which brought disaster upon the traditional culture of China. Its severity was not simply a matter of the damage done by Red Guards to countless priceless treasures, historical relics and rare books. Much more serious was the sweeping critique and utter repudiation of the ethics and value system of Chinese culture in all its ramifications. The disjunction in Chinese cultural history thus created deprived many young people of the opportunity to be brought up and nurtured in their traditional culture. The third challenge arises from China's present policy of reform and openness, by which gates locked for thirty years suddenly stand wide open. Many people have been overcome by greed, and for them traditional culture is the "root cause" of China's poverty and backwardness. They have turned to the pursuit of material comforts devoid of spiritual or moral substance. But having reached rock bottom the third time, many scholars, noting that some developed countries have absorbed spiritual nourishment from Confucius and Lao Zi, have once again undertaken sober reflection on the tradition, separating the essence from the dross. A hundred years of tempering has burned away the impurities, refining the pure gold of Chinese culture for the China of the twenty-first century.

For our research in Chinese theology, this century of testing and refining of Chinese culture has much to offer. Western missionaries, coming to China in the late Qing period, depended to a certain degree on the economic and political advantages accorded them by the unequal treaties. These missionaries did not take Chinese culture seriously, as did the Nestorians or Matteo Ricci and this is one important reason for the impoverishment of Chinese theology today. The greatest contribution of the Protestant missionaries was perhaps their translation of the Bible. China also benefited from their medical work and educational institutions. Yet the pages of Chinese theology remained blank until after the May Fourth Movement, eighty years after the entry of Protestant missions into China, when people like T.C. Chao (1888-1979), Jia Yuming (1880-1964), Xie Fuya (1892-1992) and Y.T. Wu (1893-1979) began making their entries. Without exception, all these theologians were nurtured by traditional Chinese culture, marked by and immersed in traditional Chinese thinking in the course of their theological formation. They became the bright stars in the dark sky of Chinese theology in the 1930s and 40s, the group referred to by Xie Fuya as "Christian
School of Theology in Beijing and a Vice-President of the World Council of Church in 1948. He is also the author of the well-loved hymn "Golden Breaks the Dawn."
4. A theological educator and evangelical theologian.
5. Also known in the West as N.Z. Xie, Xie was a Christian philosopher who devoted his later years to the construction of an indigenous Chinese theology.
6. YMCA and church leader who took up the missionary notion of "three-self" in the 1920s and was instrumental in founding the Chinese Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement in 1954.
7. Known in Chinese as the Jing religion, which means blessed or luminous.
8. The Mongolian form of Nestorian Christianity which flourished during the Yuan dynasty. The name in Mongolian means "the blessed." In 1289, five years before the Franciscan John of Montecorvino reached Beijing, Kublai Khan had set up an office of religious affairs to oversee the Yelikewen and those who followed "Mar Jesua" and the "Rabbans" (teachers).
9. The famous Jesuit missionary who reached China in 1582. On his arrival in Beijing in 1601 he introduced Western science, technology, astronomy and mathematics, as well as Christianity.

98.3.8

NEWSBRIEFS

Social Witness: Yuyao Church in Zhejiang province has been working hard recently to lighten the load of society in caring for those in need. According to incomplete figures, the city's 37 different churches together donated over 39,000 yuan (=US$ 4,700 approx.) in 1997 toward such projects as relieving poverty, helping those affected in natural disasters, aiding the disabled and the elderly, as well as repairing local bridges and roads.

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Discussion Group: At the end of October last year, the TSPM committee of Dongshan district in Guangzhou city (Canton) worked together with the district Minorities and Religious Affairs Bureau to organize a discussion group on the "Integration of Religion Within Socialist Society". Around 100 participants from various cross-sections of society attended the meetings. Participants drew the conclusion that Chinese Christians cannot ignore their patriotic duty to their country if they are to find a voice in Chinese society today. They held that only when believers recognize their duty toward their country and their fellow citizens can they find the space within society to develop and grow in their faith.

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Winter Warmth: Due to low profits in his work unit, one believer in Zaozhuang, Shandong Province recently lost his job. Undeterred, he quickly gathered together several other unemployed believers and set up his own service company, providing any and every kind of service to the local community as the skills of the company members allowed. The company members make a point of providing those in need within the local community, such as orphans, old people, the handicapped and the sick, with low cost or free services. The group also offers its services to the local church, such as in cleaning and repairs. In this way, the company and its operations have received a very
favourable assessment within the local community and have even appeared in a local television news feature on its activities.

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98.4.1

Does The Church Have Anything To Say To Modern China?

(ANS) 'I don't believe in Christianity, nor do I oppose it. I cannot see how this religion, begun in the Middle East 2,000 years ago, can have anything to do with civilized human beings living in the 20th century. Today we live in the period of the information explosion. We have placed a man on the moon and seen a probe land on Mars. Organ transplants and test tube babies are common. Today, we are cloning sheep, tomorrow maybe humans. How on earth can Christianity have anything to say to today's world?"

These are the words of the nephew of one evangelist in Beijing after she tried to share the Gospel message with him. They represent one of the typical challenges of evangelism which the church faces today in modern China. In order to address the question of how the Chinese church should carry out evangelism today, a symposium on "self-propagation" was held in Shanghai last year in November (see Ans 98.2.2). In March's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, several participants at the symposium from all areas of China and all levels within the church give their opinions on how the Chinese church needs to approach the task of evangelism today.

Symposium participants all agreed that the basic purpose of any church is to spread the Gospel and bring people to a knowledge of God. Tong Yiqiang from Ningxia Province says that self-propagation is precisely the aspect of "Three Self" which sets the church apart from other organizations within society. Every work unit and organization in society seeks to govern itself well and support itself financially, but it is only the church which also seeks to spread a message of Good News. Similarly, Gao Siqian from Sichuan Province believes that if self-propagation work is done well, the other two areas of self-administration and self-support will fall into place. If believers receive good, solid teaching about faith then they will be more enthusiastic in their support for a church which gives them what they need. Therefore, self-propagation is the key to the rest of the church's life and work.

As Jin Xuezhe from Liaoning Province points out, the church has focused on different aspects of "Three Self" throughout its recent history. In the 1950's, when the church had just broken links with overseas mission boards, the areas of self-administration and self-support were seen as those needing most attention, as the church sought to establish its independence. In the 1980's, after a period of much
hardship and struggle, the church’s doors were opened again and evangelism was emphasized. Now, however, with the tremendous rise in church membership, administration and self-support are once again demanding most of church workers’ time and energy, as they seek to provide for the immediate needs of growing congregations. Rev. Cao Shengjie from Shanghai comments that efforts within the church are currently concentrated on church building, setting up management committees, training groups etc. Similarly, any talk of “evangelism” concentrates on the purely practical - how to write and deliver a sermon, which tone of voice to use in the pulpit, how to present the message, and so on. All these things are necessary and useful but, as Rev. Cao emphasizes, there is a danger that reflection on the actual content of the church’s message is being neglected amidst all these practical considerations.

The basic message of the Gospel never changes and is timeless. However, the way this Gospel message is presented and interpreted depends on the time and place situation in which this takes place. Rev. Cao writes that Chinese evangelists should not rely only on books written long ago or by overseas theologians, as the focus of these books may not be suitable to the current Chinese context. If evangelists rely on such texts as models then their message may be misunderstood, misinterpreted or simply rejected because it simply does not “fit” the reality of today’s China and simply doesn’t “speak” to those who hear such a message.

In a similar vein, Rev. Wang Weifan from Jiangsu Province argues that it is essential for Chinese believers to have their own experiences of the truths of the Gospel within their own lives, and then to spread the Good News based on their own experiences. Rev. Wang believes that a testimony from a Chinese believer about how the Gospel message has made an actual difference to his or her life can reach far more people in China than a message extracted from some Western theological text.

Finally, Lin Zhihua from Fujian Province reminds evangelists that they must seek to build some kind of link for their listeners between today’s modern world and the world of the Bible. In order to do this, evangelists must find out as much as they can about what is going on in the world around them and in the lives of those who come to hear them preach. They must then seek a way to apply Biblical and eternal truths to the situations in which their listeners currently find themselves. Lin quotes the 19th Century preacher Charles Spurgeon who, when asked how he prepared a sermon, replied, “In one hand, I take up my Bible; and in the other hand I take the newspaper.” In a similar manner, preaching sermons which were suitable several decades ago will not succeed in reaching out to a Chinese population facing the concerns of the 1990s. Lin says that people come to listen to evangelists because they want to hear something of direct relevance to themselves and their lives today. If evangelists can only throw a lot of Bible quotes at people but have no way of showing how Scripture can apply to real-life situations in the world then people will turn away and reject the Gospel message as outdated and irrelevant. [989 words]
Registration Brings Reconciliation

(ANS) The church which exists today in Yancheng, Jiangsu Province, grew out of two very different denominational traditions - the Church of Christ in China and the True Jesus Church. Since the time of its re-opening in 1982, adherents of the different faith backgrounds have not only found it difficult to live side-by-side but have actually sought to attack each other. However, as Ding Jianling reports in March's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, it took the legal registration of the church as a place of worship to start the process of reconciliation between the two faith communities.

For 14 years, since 1982, adherents to the traditions of the Church of Christ in China and the True Jesus Church maintained their differences within the one Yancheng church. As Ding explains, the differences did not only extend to observing different holy days, patterns of worship or manners of baptism. The barrier between the two groups was so high that each group insisted on having its own offertory box within the church, managing its own finances, paying for its own share of water and electricity usage within the church building and even having its own cassette player for use in worship. Contact between the two groups was kept to a minimum, and preachers from one group would actually go so far as to attack the other group and its ways from the pulpit.

Help finally came in the form of the call to registration in May 1996. In order to fulfill legal requirements, the church needed to set up a church council made up of members from both groups who would then be responsible for the running of the church as a whole. The municipal Religious Affairs Bureau and the Municipal Christian Council called a meeting of 30 church workers from both sides to set up such a committee to be responsible for church affairs, and from this meeting a new era of cooperation was born.

Since 1996, Ding points out, the two groups within the Yancheng church have worked together on several projects. As well as agreeing to recognize ordained ministers from both backgrounds, the two groups have set up a joint choir, a joint committee for the repair and maintenance of church property, and have for the past two years have successfully run joint 5-day training courses during the Spring Festival holiday season. Through such initiatives, believers from both sides are finally sitting down to worship and pray together and finding unity despite their differences.

As the two groups within the church become slowly reconciled, more and more people are joining the church. The great increase in new young believers, who do not bring with them the denominational "baggage" of the older church members, has greatly helped spur the reconciliation process within the church. Similarly, through the setting up of joint church committees, the Yancheng church is discovering a way of running the church through consensus and democracy rather than through the old way of the pastors alone making all the decisions and thereby being "all-powerful".
As Ding reports, those working for reconciliation within the church see the pulpit as vital. Most of the 1,500 believers within the church are from surrounding rural areas and have a fairly low educational level and understanding of the faith. Therefore, these believers easily believe and follow whatever they hear, hence it is vital that they hear the gospel message of peace, understanding, reconciliation and unity. [584 words]

98.4.3

Call For Church To Bring In Its Own "Anti-Corruption" Mechanism

(ANS) Living conditions in China have certainly improved tremendously since the start of the "opening and reform" policy in the 1980s. However, during this period in China certain negative phenomena can be seen to accompany economic growth and prosperity. Various forms of corruption are now widespread throughout Chinese society and, as Zhou Zheng reports in the March edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, the church has not managed to escape this wave of corruption either.

As more and more wealth circulates around China, Zhou reports that more and more people are turning to gambling, drugs and prostitution in order to appropriate some of this wealth for themselves. Corruption, graft and bribery are on the increase among state employees and local government officials. In order to counter these phenomenon, the government has tried to introduce a series of anti-corruption measures at all levels of society, including setting up various discipline and inspection committees to investigate cases of suspected corruption.

In a similar way, Zhou points out that the church in China has also bloomed and prospered since 1979, with the number of believers and new churches increasing at a phenomenal rate. However, some have been tempted to misuse their positions of authority within the church in order to embezzle church funds and believers' offerings, engage in illicit relationships with members of the congregation or even to attack or pressure other church members. Many people outside the church are given a bad impression when they see such phenomena occurring within the church. It also leads to disillusionment among believers, who stop worshipping in the church when they see such things happening.

Zhou believes that it is a matter of some urgency for the national China Christian Council to provide some kind of guidelines and plan for dealing with and preventing corruption from staining the church as it has various other areas of society at present. He also believes that grassroots churches need to set up their own supervisory systems, to make the affairs of the church more transparent and therefore less open to corrupt tendencies. [360 words]
Hainan Island's "Indonesian" Church

(ANS) Nestled among the rubber and banana plantations, the pepper trees and the pineapple gardens of tropical Hainan Island lies Bincunshan Overseas Chinese farm. The inhabitants of this farm, about 300 people, are all overseas Chinese who returned to China from Indonesia in the 1960's. Last year, Zhou Zelang visited this "Indonesian Village" and reported on its life of worship in the March edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church.

The Bodani Church in Bincunshan was opened in 1989. Before then, believers had no fixed place to worship. They had to choose between squeezing a few dozen believers into a few houses to worship together or making the trek to another church over 10km away. Zhou tells how, in December 1986, the godfather of a choir member in the church came over from Indonesia to visit. When he saw the community of believers were so dedicated to God but had no place to worship, he returned to Indonesia and collected around 120,000 yuan (=US$14,800 approx.) to help finance a church building. When the request to go ahead with the building of the church was put to the local authorities, they dedicated 2.5mu (= 0.17 hectares) of land free of charge for the building work, so that the villagers would finally have a place to worship.

As Zhou reports, the Bodani Church is unique among the thousands of churches around China in that it holds all its services in Indonesian. This unique style of worship, using Indonesian style hymns and melodies, has attracted many visiting believers from the Chinese mainland. Because of their connection with Indonesia, the church also has more overseas connections than most other churches in China. The believers at Bincunshan are proud of their Indonesian and Chinese heritage - every year at Christmas, they prepare Indonesian dishes and Chinese dim sum to serve to any visitors who have come to the church to celebrate the festive season with them.

Believers at the Bodani Church are distributed over the large area of fields which makes up the Bincunshan Overseas Chinese farm and many live over 10km away from other believers' homes. Therefore, in order to build up a sense of community within the church, believers attach great importance to organizing home visits to each other, usually scheduling these for Tuesday or Saturday evenings. These visits are particularly important for older believers in their 80's or 90's, as well as those who are ill or those who have something to celebrate.

Zhou describes how concern for each other is also expressed in practical ways among the believers. Living in a farming community, incomes are low, and most believers cannot afford to pay for medical costs when they fall ill or when there is a medical emergency. When such events arise, the church is quick to organize special collections so that the sick person can receive the treatment they need. Zhou cites the case of one believer whose grandson once stabbed his eye out with a ball-point pen while playing. The grandfather was distraught with worry, as he hadn't the financial

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means to send the boy to hospital. Within two hours of learning about the accident, the Bincunshan believers had collected together over 1,300 yuan (=US$ 160 approx.) to enable the boy to be rushed to the local hospital and receive emergency treatment. [560 words]

Concrete Ideas For Helping The Church’s Poor

(ANS) For many years now, the church in China has been trying to grapple with the problem of poverty among believers in rural areas. Stories abound of believers who lack clothes, food and money, furniture and electricity, and who are even living together with their animals in sheds. Such congregations can hardly afford to send their children to school, much less buy any Bibles or train any of its members in theology. On the other hand, many churches in city and coastal areas of China are comparatively well off and could lend a hand to their disadvantaged brothers and sisters if they knew how.

In March's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Guo Keguang and Wang Zhusong offer some practical suggestions about what such wealthy churches could do to help.

The authors believe the first problem to be tackled is the problem of not having enough clothes, especially winter clothing. Believers in wealthy coastal churches often have more clothes than they could possibly wear. The writers suggest that each church point should collect items of clothing from its members and then send them to the county or city level church authorities, letting them act as a central collection and coordination point. These central churches could then establish links with poorer inland churches and arrange representative to take the clothing to those places at fixed times each year.

Similarly, when it comes to financial donations, churches should be encouraged to designate certain days of the year when they hold special offerings for poorer churches, and then send the proceeds from these offerings to a local central collection point. The writers point out that churches can of course have direct links with an individual poor church and send money directly, but collecting money centrally saves on transfer and administrative costs. Guo and Wang point out that most believers are more than willing to help out their poorer country counterparts if given a chance and some concrete way to do this, but many pastors do not see this as a priority and therefore do nothing to encourage this giving.

Finally, in order to get to the roots of the poverty in poor rural areas, the authors suggest that various technical and highly educated experts from city churches consider visiting poorer rural churches and analysing the situation there. It is possible that such experts could give advice and instruction in better farming methods, tapping local natural resources, increasing productivity and exploiting various local geographical advantages. Similarly, wealthy city churches could regularly arrange to receive young believers from the countryside and offer them shelter and assistance in finding work or
educational opportunities in urban areas. In these ways, wealthy churches can directly help poorer communities tackle the roots of their poverty. [469 words]

ANS Feature

Church In "Revolutionary Heartland" Cares For Believers Of All Ages

The city and district of Ji'an lies in the remote heart of Jiangxi Province. Famous for its proximity to Jinggang Mountain, a revolutionary base and starting point of the historic Long March, the area has remained largely rural and peasant-based and has seen little development due to its remote location. Two years ago, Ji'an's connection to the outside world was given a boost with the arrival of the Beijing-Kowloon railway. In March this year, ANS editor Ian Groves travelled along this railway line to Ji'an and discovered a thriving and caring community of believers in the middle of this "heartland of the Revolution".

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When asked what the greatest strength of their church is, 72-year old pastor Chen and 73-year old pastor Ju have no hesitation in replying - "our lay worker team!" The two elderly pastors are supported by a full-time woman assistant pastor and a full-time evangelist, together with a team of 18 part-time lay workers. Most of the church worker team are in their 30's or 40's and have been trained during winter correspondence courses held in association with the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

The two pastors receive no salary from the church and live off their government pensions and the goodwill of the congregation. The church pays a modest living allowance to the assistant pastor and evangelist. Other church workers live off the salaries from their regular jobs. The church as a whole is completely financed from tithes and weekly offerings, and receives no financial assistance from provincial or national Christian Councils or government authorities. An accountant is elected from within the congregation to oversee the finances of the church.

The city has two church buildings at its disposal. The main church building in the city was built in 1946 by the Nazarene church (Xuanzhenghui). It was renovated in 1996 through special offerings held within the church for this specific purpose. There were several church buildings in the city before Liberation, and in 1985 the church tried to recover the property of one of these buildings which had been confiscated previously and turned into a factory. The factory would not return the land or the church building, but it agreed to compensate the church financially. With this money, the church bought a second plot of land in the city and constructed a second, smaller church building.

Pastor Chen explained that both pastors decide for themselves the content of sermons, and sermon topics are in no way decided by the church or any central body. Both pastors pray each week and then choose topics which are relevant to the different times and seasons. Once each pastor prepares a sermon, he or she preaches that sermon in one church on one Sunday and then the same sermon in the second church the following week, so that all believers in the city have a chance to hear it.

Around 1,000 believers worship in the city's two churches. In the surrounding urban areas there are around 10 other meeting points, and a total of 40 meeting points in the 30 counties which make up the entire Ji'an district. The main problem for the church at the moment is finding a way to look after the needs of all these meeting points, some of which are in remote and inaccessible regions. The main city church has set up a small dormitory and classrooms, and has repeatedly requested the provincial Christian Council to send teachers to come and hold short training courses so that more church workers can reach out to the meeting points. So far, the provincial Christian Council has not been able to grant the Ji'an church's request.

Baptisms take place in the city's main church once a year around July or August. About
100 people are baptized each year. Baptismal candidates are those who have attended church for at least a year and who have also received special instruction for three hours per week over a period of 1-2 months prior to baptism. Baptism is carried out by full-immersion in the church's baptistry.

Since 80% of believers in Jian are women, the church seeks to care for the special needs of women believers. Every Wednesday, the church holds a special women's service, where female believers meet to share fellowship and testimonies. Recently, a special service was also held to commemorate International Women's Day.

Similarly, the church has been especially careful in recent months to nurture its younger members, since 60% of the congregation is now below the age of 45. A Sunday school was started in the church last year, with around 10 children of believers taking part each week. The children hear Bible stories and practise simple choruses, but materials are few and so the content of the Sunday school is limited. This year, the church started a Young People's Fellowship for those under the age of 50. This group has a core membership of 20-30 people who meet on the last Saturday of each month. They hold question and answer sessions on the Bible, discuss issues of faith and how to express their faith, practice dramas and have also formed a small choir. This group also goes on outings to local counties occasionally where they try to offer financial and practical assistance to the poor and homeless. The church in Jian hopes that the Youth Group may serve to provide a link to some of the many meeting points in more remote areas of Jian district which church workers cannot reach very often.

For a long time, the Jian church was concerned to find a way of looking after its older members in need. Finally, on "Old People's Day" in October 1997, the church set up a small Old Folk's Home. Within the main church building compound lies a building which once belonged to the church but was confiscated during the 1960's and turned into a residential block. Half of the families in this block were Christian and agreed to move out and locate elsewhere in the city so that the church could use their rooms to set up the old people's home. Seven old people now live in the home, one man and six women. Since there are so many old people in need, the residents were chosen according to strict criteria - they had to be over 70, baptized for more than three years and have no children or relatives at all to take care of them. The residents donate their government pensions of 70 RMB a month (= US$ 8.5 approx) to the church to pay for their living expenses, and they bring their own furniture and possessions with them when they move in. The rest of the money for the upkeep of the home is provided by the church congregation itself. There are many other older believers who also need the same care provided by the home, but this is not possible at the moment because of the lack of space. The church has tried to negotiate resettling the families who occupy the rest of the residential building, but these have so far refused to move. [1200 words]

ANS Feature:

The Story Of One Bible

During the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), all forms of religious belief, including Christianity, came under severe attack. Where possible, believers met privately to keep their faith alive. At a time when the possession of Bibles in particular could lead to severe persecution or even death, believers often faced difficult decisions about what to do with their copies of the Scriptures. In February's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Lan Xin from Shenyang, Liaoning Province, shares the story of what happened to her own Bible during that time of upheaval.

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There are several Bibles on my bookshelf - old style Bibles with the characters printed in columns, more modern Bibles with the characters running from left to right, big Bibles, medium-sized Bibles, small Bibles - it is really hard to know which one to choose. However, whatever anyone might say, there is one particular copy which is very old, very battered.
and even losing its pages which I can nevertheless never part with or bear to lose. Every time I see this Bible, I unconsciously think of its troubled history during those tumultuous years....

At that time there was a new movement to sweep away all the "Cow Demons and Snake Spirits", as well as "Smashing The Four Olds" and establishing the "Four New's". According to the definitions of the time, the Bible definitely belonged to one of the classes of the "Four Olds" and was thus to be "smashed"! At that time, individual Christians were suffering all kinds of persecution and being "struggled" against at various meetings. Bibles, hymnals and devotional literature were being seized and burned one-by-one - it really brought pain to the heart of believers: One day around midday in the Spring of 1967, a gang of people suddenly called on one believer's home and turned it upside down and searched it. After they had searched her home for a long time, they finally emerged. Some people used a metal trowel to tap on the walls of the courtyard surrounding the house. At this time, I was standing outside the courtyard and was so scared I had broken out in a cold sweat. I had just turned around to leave when I saw a person using the trowel to dig in the spot where this believer's family had buried their Bibles. I was so anxious that I unconsciously started biting my lips, drawing blood in the process, and yet I felt nothing, I just kept praying to Jesus to bless and protect this family and send peace on them. The person dug a while longer and then stopped without having found anything, then the whole group left.

After this incident, believers in the neighbourhood started secretly burning their own Bibles, hymnals and related literature. One day, our relatives also sent over their Bibles to us, saying we should add ours to the pile and then burn the lot immediately to avoid trouble. At that time I was just a teenager. I saw all those believers with an ardent love for God become so frightened, including an evangelist who was a relative of my mother and had introduced the Gospel to her long before. Even to this day I still cannot quite comprehend why they reacted like this at that time. But my mother's attitude in dealing with the Bible was not the same as theirs. She looked upon the Bible as more valuable than even her own life, more important than gold, silver or any other riches. Neither my mother nor I could bear to burn our Bible, hymnal or any other devotional books. At that time we had only one thought - whatever happened, we had to preserve our Bible and could never, never burn it.

In earlier years, when I was just a child, the one thing that I remember most clearly and which has stayed with me all along is how mum would come home from work every day and, as soon as she had some free time, would take out her Bible and begin to read. At night, while others were sleeping, she would sit there reading well into the night. The next day, when I got up, she would already be sitting there reading. For several years she did like this. At that time, I still didn't know what was so marvellous about the contents of that book. In those days the number of Bibles available were few and far between, so mother would divide her Bible into separate little booklets for us children to read. I finished one book in one sitting and thus for the first time tasted the Bible's sweetness for myself. At that moment, I understood my mother and understood why she ardently studied the Bible every day.

In the end, I decided together with mum to uncover the Bibles buried under our stove and send them to a believer's home in the countryside to be buried in their back garden. We felt much more relieved once the Bibles were secured in that place. But, the feeling of relief didn't last long. One evening, we had just finished supper when there was a knock at the door. We opened the door cautiously and were surprised to find the caller was not a stranger but the son of the believer from the countryside - he had brought a bag with him. At that moment I guessed what was going on - could it be...? I didn't dare finish this thought but instead hurriedly invited the guest inside and he then explained the reason for coming. My mind was buzzing and my mother's face took on a worried look. As expected, the people in the countryside were afraid of being implicated, so they had sent the Bibles and other books back to us. Moreover, that believer had added her own Bible to the pile, so now we had three families' Bibles in our possession!

It just so happened that at this time, when one believer was being struggled against in a public meeting, he was pressured into revealing our names. The head of our work unit subsequently repeatedly called us in to explain ourselves. Our relatives also knew that the Bibles in our possession hadn't been burned. It was a dangerous situation and we felt really scared as we hadn't the faintest idea what to do for the best. If we went ahead and burned the Bibles then all this trouble would disappear. But, how could we
ever bring ourselves to burn the Bibles we loved with a passion? We begged the Lord Jesus to give us wisdom and understanding and protect those Bibles. In the end, my mother’s gaze and mine fell on the colourful bean flowers that were just opening up in abundance in front of our window. With this, hope sprang into our hearts. According to our original plan we set to work, using plastic cloths to wrap up the Bibles and the other books well. We then uprooted the flowers, put the wrapped up books underneath and then put the flowers back on top, flattening and straightening the earth until not a trace of disturbance could be seen. Only then did we feel relieved and were able to spend about half a month in peace.

One evening, the local Neighbourhood Street Committee suddenly called a meeting during which, without naming names, they carried out a scathing attack on religious believers. The head of the meeting said: “All reactionary things have to be hit, otherwise they won’t fall down. Those who are believers in this meeting should make themselves known of their own accord, otherwise we will drag it out of them by force...” After the meeting, once we were back at home, mother was disturbed. She said in a low voice to me: “Maybe we’d better find a place away from our property for those books.” I understood her meaning and nodded my head, but where could we put those books? Where could we put them where they would be safe and not get lost? On the following evening in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, I secretly dug up the books from under the flowers, put them in a big bag, took a trowel, made sure no one was about and ran off with the bag over my shoulder like a thief. As I was running I thought, “Where on earth shall I go? Where can I bury these books?” Tears ran down my face. “Lord! God! Is this what you have allowed to happen?” Oh... suddenly a train whizzed past in front of me, lighting up before my eyes. Ah! I had, without realizing it, already reached the railway line. This gave me an idea: on both sides of the track there was long grass and weeds everywhere – wouldn’t it be a good idea to bury the books there? I quickly put the bag down, took out the trowel from my pocket, looked around, chose a place and started digging. At that time it was well into the night and there wasn’t even a shadow to be seen on either side of the tracks. I gathered up my courage and cautiously shovelled dirt without thinking. After digging the hole, I carefully and orderly placed the bag of wrapped books into the hole, then covered it up with the removed earth, making it flat and neat. In order to recognize the spot later on I put a fragment of brick on the place as a marker. At that time, my tears were falling like rain, as they might if I had just lost something important in my life... I had to go, but I just couldn’t bear to leave immediately, I simply retreated slowly backwards from that spot.

A breath of cold air brushed my face, and caused me to shiver - it was like waking up from a dream. Before that moment I had been too busy to realize that I was actually feeling tired and afraid and I was also sweating all over my body. The wind blew over my body and it felt so comfortable and made me feel so happy. I raised my head and calmly looked out over the dark blue sky. For the first time I realized that it was a brilliantly clear night, with bright moonlight and stars which seemed to be out in particular force that night. Although a white cloud occasionally appeared, it soon brushed past. The sky was so bright, it seemed to me as if the Lord Jesus had arranged it specially in order to show me the way and guide me along.

Returning home, my mum still hadn’t gone to sleep, she was waiting for me. Seeing me, the first thing she asked was, “Where did you bury the Bibles? Are they safe?” After I told her the situation, she didn’t say anything, just constantly repeated: “Thank God! Thank God!” But I could see the worried look in her eyes. This big task was accomplished now and we had peace and stability for eight days, but our hearts were still not completely at rest. We weren’t able to eat or sleep very well and this whole affair was always on our minds. Finally one evening I awoke from a nightmare: In the dream, when I went to look at the place where the Bibles were buried, there was nothing there any more and I didn’t know who had dug everything up! I was so afraid that I couldn’t go back to sleep again! Early the next day I hurried to the spot where the Bibles were buried but found that nothing had happened at all - the grass on the ground was untouched and the piece of brick still lay in its place undisturbed. At that time I was so relieved that I nearly jumped for joy, so full of emotion that the tears just ran down. I gave heartfelt thanks to God - with God’s protection, everything can be safe.

The political storm eventually blew over and Mum and I decided that it would be better to get the Bibles out again - I certainly had no objection to that idea! The next night at 3 in the morning I set out once again. It was already October and the early morning temperature was very low.
covered the distance along a small track, managing to reach my destination in under an hour. On arrival I discovered that the clothes I was wearing were already soaked with sweat. I carefully dug out the cloth bag containing the wrapped Bibles, hurriedly placed it on my back and left. All the Bibles were brought back, and mother once again went back to studying her Bible day and night even more devotedly than before, conscientiously turning from page to page. It was this Bible that had given her endless knowledge and wisdom, it was this Bible that had let her know how to be a true Christian and it was this Bible that lit up the path she was to follow, showing her clearly how to follow Jesus, how to go along the road of self-sacrifice.

With the implementation of new religious policy after the Cultural Revolution, mum worked hard under the guidance of the provincial and municipal CC/TSPM committees to get back the original site of the town church and to build a new church building on that land. She underwent many different kinds of exams and tests and eventually was ordained a church elder.

Having come through this time of trial, the Bible eventually started to be published again within China itself. After hearing this news, I was so excited that I couldn't sleep for several nights. At that time, there were four in my family, including two young children, and our monthly income was only less than 100 yuan (=US$ 12 approx.) - life was really not very easy at that time. But, when I heard they were collecting contributions to go toward the re-publishing of Bibles, I took out a 100 yuan note without the slightest reservation and donated it as a sign of my feelings.

Today, every time I go into a church bookstore, I see all kinds of versions of the Bible and a variety of devotional literature spread out on the shelves there. Many believers arbitrarily make their choices and walk off with whatever they choose. At such times I have an indescribable feeling of happiness and of being moved. God's grace is truly great! We should treasure what we have and use more enthusiasm than ever before to study, research and spread the Bible. On top of all this, we need to be "salt and light" and be a good witness to Jesus. [2469 words]

NEWSBRIEFS

The groundbreaking ceremony for the new site of the Guangdong Union Theological Seminary took place in December last year in the Dongpung district on the outskirts of Guangzhou City. The new seminary is estimated to cost 20 million yuan (=US$ 2.4 million approx.). Three-quarters of this amount is budgeted for land and labour costs and the rest for materials and fittings. The seminary will initially include a teaching building, dormitory, dining halls and shower buildings, library, meeting hall and a service centre. The seminary hopes to run four different courses for seven different classes, with a total of 200 students.

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Registration: Out of the 210 villages in the suburb areas around the Inner Mongolia capital, Hohhot, 127 church meeting points have already been successfully registered. Another 40 meeting points have applied for registration and are awaiting approval. The registration procedure has been useful in uncovering and suppressing the "Established King" (Beiliwang) sect in the area, which was using at least one meeting point as a cover for its operations.

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Lay Training: Ganzhou City in Jiangxi Province held its first ever lay training program in late October to early November last year. Teachers were provided from the provincial CC/TSPM committee, the seminary in the provincial capital Nanchang, and from other counties. Over 80 local church workers attended the week-long course.

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Social Service: Guizhou Theological Class has now incorporated a course in practical care for disadvantaged members of the congregation into its curriculum. Every Saturday afternoon students go out into the local neighbourhood to learn how to serve the needs of weak, sick, elderly or handicapped believers.

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Course Upgrade: The Jingling Theological Class, set up in 1993 in Yongnian County, Hebei Province, has now been upgraded from a county-level to a municipal-level course. The class was renamed the 'Handian City Jingling Christian Theology Class' in a formal ceremony in November last year. This is in recognition of the fact that the class, which trains church workers and evangelists over a period of two years, has successfully graduated over 160 students for work in the local mission field since its inception.

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Error Correction: On 26th October last year, Pastor Shen Chen'en presided over worship at the International Church in Shanghai during the state visit of the King and Queen of Norway, not Shen Derong, as indicated in ANS 98.1.10. We apologize for this mistake.

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