

The Coming and Going of Protestant Christianity in China Today

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There is an interesting Chinese expression, *lai-long qu-mo*. Translated into Western physiological terms, it reads something like: “veins sending (blood) in and the arteries discharging (blood) out.” Figuratively the expression means the origin and development of something. Adopting that expression, I shall here sketch my view of the coming and going of Chinese Protestant Christianity today. I make an attempt to trace how Protestantism in the People’s Republic of China has come this way; I shall also suggest the direction in which Chinese Protestant Christianity is going. Obviously I can only point out the prominent veins and arteries, leaving some of you to use an X-ray machine to study the whole circulatory system more closely. I would be happy if in this paper I could bring to your attention a living organism throbbing with life.

Coming to Terms with Political Realities

I begin with the question, “In what manner has Chinese Protestantism tried to come to terms with political realities emerging from the revolution?” I take up this question first because the Chinese Protestant Christians suddenly found themselves facing startling realities after 1949. The Chinese Communist Revolution had a socio-political-historical background of at least three decades. When the People’s Republic of China was established, it certainly was an event that “turned heaven and earth upside-down” (*tien-fan-di-fu*). It took violence to do that, yes, resulting in bloodshed and destruction. The Revolution tore down old social structures and swept aside political oppositions. It has sought to build a new social order, and to do that political power has been exercised in a new framework. Of course, the task of building up a “New China” has proved no easier than the destruction of the “Old China” The leaders soon learned that. Millions and millions of the people have found that out too. Thus the decades after the Revolution have been ridden with twists and turns and further upheavals. And there were remarkable developments too. This is perhaps

enough to remind ourselves that since 1949 China has undergone cataclysmic changes.

This reminder would have been unnecessary but for the fact that many people outside China who are supposed to be studying the Church in China refuse to see that a revolution has taken place. Some of us are still shielded from what has gone on in China by a very different world of experience—Pre-Vatican II or Post-Vatican II, Bible-Belt America or Liberal American Protestantism, missionaries who still cling to the ambition to evangelize China and ex-missionaries and mission executives who are trying to find justification for mission. In a word, many of us are too locked up in our own world to see the reality that is facing the Chinese Christians even if Christianity in China is supposed to be the subject we are interested in. We have here a hermeneutical problem.

Not only some of the good Christian folk outside China, but also the great majority of the church people in China were not prepared to face the political changes that came their way. The Catholic bishops and priests, nuns, and lay people were certainly totally unprepared. The Protestant sectarian-minded groups couldn't have cared less. Some denominational-minded church people had felt somewhat restless about the social conditions at the eve of the Revolution, but most clergy and lay church workers were too absorbed in the internal affairs of the institutional church. There were a few exceptions. Y.T. Wu was one of these.

Wu was converted to Christianity through a reading of the sermon on the Mount. In the 1930's, Wu, a YMCA secretary, was already wrestling with the dual question, "What kind of social order does China need?" and "What can Christianity contribute toward such a new order?" By the middle of the 1930's, he was sure that what China needed was socialism such as Marx advocated, without subscribing to Marxist atheistic metaphysical presuppositions.¹ His position is that Christianity and Marxism can coexist. When the Chinese Communist Revolution was going strong in 1947, he certainly approved of the direction in which Chinese history was moving. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Wu was the most forceful leader of Protestant groups trying to find a viable position for the Church to stand on in the mighty stream of history that was rushing on. In 1948-1949 several messages were sent by the National Christian Council in China to Christians (meaning Protestants) in China. During 1950 and 1951 two especially important documents were issued.² One, "The Christian Manifesto" (subtitled "Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China"), was prepared by a group of Protestant leaders after meeting Premier Zhou Enlai in May 1950 and was eventually signed by some 400,000 Protestant Christians. The Manifesto accepted the leadership of the new government in opposing imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, and urged Christians to take part in the efforts to build a New China. The second document, "The United Declaration of the Delegates of Chinese Christian Churches and Institutions," was adopted

by representatives of Protestant churches and organizations meeting in Beijing in April 1951 in the thick of the Korean War. The document adopted and “oppose-America, support-Korea” stand. It called upon all Protestant Christian bodies to sever all ties with American mission agencies and all other foreign missions to realize self-support, self-government and self-propagation. It supported the government’s land reform policy and repression of anti-revolutionaries.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) was born in the midst of activities which gave rise to such documents as those just mentioned. From the face-value of the words contained in the documents, it is easy to see that the movement was in the main interacting horizontally with the historical forces at work. It reacted against forces which represented the Old Order and readily aligned itself with forces, yes, political forces, which appeared to its participants to be bringing in the New Order. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the early leaders of the Three-Self Movement were too naive about the world. Naive or not, they had certain convictions and they participated in history. Actually they were not without a reserve of power that came from a vertical relationship. That reserve of power was latent at that time. It was released gradually later on, and we see its vitality even more today.

It should be said that TSPM at that stage was very far from representing a broad spectrum of Chinese Protestantism. There were definitely groups which refused to go along with that movement. Especially at the point of reckoning with political realities, it was simply not in the frame of mind of many Christians that the Gospel should have anything to do with politics. Wang Mingdao is an eminent representative figure in this respect. There must have been hundreds and thousands of evangelistic and pietistic-minded Protestant leaders and followers who thought the same way.

Yet can Christians and churches avoid being in touch with the powers that be? It can be evaded for a time, but not for long. In fact, even if the religious bodies don’t want to get close to it, it will come to them. In the case of PRC, the United Front is the means by which the government will enable religious organizations to come out into the open.

The United Front is a rather unique feature in the Chinese system. Mao Zedong saw the world in terms of contradictions—class struggle, forces of production at odds with social relations, clash of ideologies, civil war, international conflict, etc. Some of these contradictions, belonging to the internal problems of the people, may be called non-antagonistic contradictions, while others, separating the people from the enemy, may be called antagonistic contradictions. It is the job of the state, with the help of the Communist Party, to handle these contradictions, internal or otherwise. With its power of analysis, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the Chinese Communist Party recognizes three components in society: the progressives, the moderates (usually in the majority), and the reactionaries. Given the goal of the state to deal with certain contradictions, the Party works with the progressives and wins

over the moderates, by persuasion or education, and then isolates and finally crushes the reactionaries. This strategy of the United Front helps the state to line up all the possible elements and eliminates the obstacles to achieve the given goal of the state, be it to destroy an enemy of the people or to build up the nation. Mao Zedong called the United Front one of the nation's "three treasures," and he used it extensively all through his career. It can become a ruthless weapon for it recognizes no ultimate moral principles. The definitions of "progressives," "moderates" and "reactionaries" are purely relative, depending on the target, which shifts all the time. But the United Front can also be a highly effective means to unify the nation for a worthy goal.

Where does religion enter the picture? If a religious group is a reactionary force, it is a target to be eliminated. If it is an elements of a moderate sort, it can be won over. If it is progressive, it can work side by side with the government. There are some religious groups which do not want to be bothered with politics, yet whether they know it or not, their beliefs in one way or another have social implications, and once they are organized they are social organizations. Like all social entities, the religious bodies will have to be reckoned with by the political structure. In the Three-Self Patriotic Movement some leaders may be called "progressives" while many are "moderates." We can see how that movement functions in the context of the United Front.

TSPM has not had smooth sailing in its history. Church-state relationship is never simple. What with a state which is avowedly atheistic! To add to the intricacy it has a United Front policy which is tricky at times. Yet, assuming a church movement is willing to align itself with the United Front, it is not just any social or political organization, but it has also a religious loyalty which has a transcendent dimension. How to maintain that transcendent loyalty is the test of the integrity of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

As is rightly said, TSPM is the political arm through which the Church reckons with the power that be. The Church needs a political instrument like TSPM to deal with political realities. In time TSPM itself has adopted something of the UF method in its attempt to unite as far as possible all the Protestant Christians—be they "liberals" or "conservatives," "mainline" denominations or "independent" evangelists, "rightists" or "leftists." But hopefully TSPM, being an arm of the church, has fundamental or transcendent principles to abide by. At all events, TSPM has the task of an acrobat walking on a tight rope, to deal with earthly political powers without losing the transcendent loyalty of the Church, as well as to handle the diversity within the Church.

One further aspect of the United Front work needs mentioning. The institutionalized channel through which religions are brought together under UFD is the system of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Councils (CPPCC). On these councils, at the national, provincial and local levels, the religious organizations are represented along side many civic, ethnic and professional groups. There the religious representatives have opportunities to

work side by side with those from all other groups represented to deal with national and community problems in a consultative capacity. Theoretically, all can work toward a common good. The Communist Party is there to advise only. In the consultative councils business is supposedly conducted according to proper procedures. If, in actual operations, CPPCC has not proven highly efficient and effective, it is due more to a lack of experience than to congenital defects of a political nature in the system. (The CPPCC was not in operation during the Cultural Revolution; it has been revived only after the fall of the Gang of Four).

Realizing Selfhood

That the selfhood of the Church in China is taken seriously is implied in the word “three-self” in the name Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The three “selves”—self-support, self-government and self-propagation—had a history prior to the TSPM that came into being in the 1950s. In the last century Protestant Mission board secretaries like Henry Venn (Church Mission Society) and Rufus Anderson (American Board of Commissioners for the Foreign Missions) were already talking in terms of the three selves. In the 1920s certain Protestant denominational leaders in China, under the encouragement of missionaries in the field, adopted the three selves as a goal for the Church in China and in fact launched a Three-Self Movement. To be sure, the three selves had to do with essentially formal matters like finance, governance and personnel. But what is worth noting is that the Chinese churchmen themselves consciously incorporated the idea for the life of the Church. The efforts of more than a score of years towards achieving selfhood in a formalistic sense were at best partially successful. Actually, the earlier Three Self Movement fell short of really seeping into the soil of the Chinese people. Why? Because the Church was not realistically facing the realities in the Chinese nation. Or, to be fair to the Church, the nation was too much in disarray all through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

By the 1950s, China entered into a new period of her history. To be sure, some people, to this day, do not like the basis on which the People’s Republic of China is founded. To be sure, mainland China is still plagued with enormous problems and shows many faults. Nevertheless, the PRC is a sovereign nation, with one billion people who have a long cultural history. These people in the mainland no doubt find plenty of imperfections in their country, but it is their country where they live and toil and raise families and have their shares of joy and sorrow. The country is not torn apart now; the people have their national identity intact and they can share their lot together. In this light, the selfhood of the Church takes on a new meaning.

The leaders of TSPM used the word “patriotic” (*ai-guo*) to characterize the way Christian people feel toward their country. We can be sure that patriotism

here has strong political connotations. After all, what has brought the nation to the present stage? After the revolution, a new political structure enabled a new economic system to operate. So *ai-guo*, loving the country, means not only a sense of belonging to the motherland (or *zhu-guo*, the country of the forefathers) with its long, proud cultural history, but also positive support of the aims and policies of the new state.

The Christians in China are accustomed to saying *ai-guo* (love country) and *ai-jiao* (love church) in one breath, as though the two loves can be brought together without tension. If asked, they can explain their *ai-guo*, love country, historically. China had been in a semi-colonial state all through the 19th century and the first part of the 20th, and even after Mao Zedong declared at Tiananmen on October 1, 1949 the Chinese people stood up, American imperialism was seen to raise its ugly head in the form of sending troops to Manchuria through Korea. After China became a unified sovereign state, Christians who could break down the wall separating the Church from the world were willing to participate in national reconstruction on a socialist model, accepting the existing political structure and exercising their citizens' rights through the given machinery. Nowadays the anti-imperialist feelings are gone and the fervor of patriotism is no longer so pronounced. In fact, many church folk, along with the rest, do not like very much to speak the political language any more. Still, most of the Christian people in the mainland have no thought of changing the present regime for another, and they are willing to do what they can within the existing economic system, with modifications and improvements here and there. Neither the political machinery nor the typical Chinese Christians' temperament encourages prophetic protest against the status quo. This explains why they do not see possible tension between *ai-guo* and *ai-jiao*. We can say that this is a limitation in their witness, yet to be fair to them, we need to ask if we would do better were we in their shoes. If we push the practicing Christians further, they would say that, to the extent they enjoy religious freedom, i.e., freedom to worship God, which they did, within the walls of the churches and at private gathering, and which they do more in the last five years than at any time previously, they love their church (*ai-jiao*) without conflict with their role as citizens in the PRC.

May I make two observations to suggest that Protestant Christianity in China is closer to achieving selfhood in its given national situation than ever before?

First, the cutting off of dependency on foreign support in the end has had a salutary effect in promoting selfhood. The severing of ties with foreign mission boards in the early 1950s was in part forced upon the Chinese Church by circumstances. Premier Zhou Enlai did not issue an edict to that effect. Rather, some of the Church leaders saw that, given the forces of history (in general, imperialistic tendencies from the Western powers and the implications of the missionary movement therewith to a greater or lesser extent and in particular, the involvement of American interests in the Korean War, thus putting the U.S. in an adversary position vis-à-vis China) the Church out of strong nationalistic

sentiments had no choice but to cut off its ties with American and other mission agencies. The churches had nothing to fall back on but themselves. It must not have been an easy period of adjustment. Some churches closed down, while other congregations pooled their resources. Still other church buildings were turned into home-industry factories, and the pastors were retrained to take part in production work. A large number of pastors went to factories or farms to work. Enduring hardship or not, the churches which remained open managed to survive financially. Later on, The TSPM committees received rent from the government for the use of church properties and administered the funds for the maintenance of the churches.

In the present period, the hundreds and hundreds of churches that have been reopened, after closing down for over a decade during the Cultural Revolution, are on the whole self-sufficient financially speaking. In some instances, rental income (collected as back-payment from the government) on church properties is of considerable help in paying for the cost of renovations. Yet, even without rental income, salary support for the pastors and other church workers, as well as cost for repair and renovation of buildings and purchase of materials, pose no great financial difficulties for most churches. The fact that in a socialist state their incomes are about the same as the rest of the working people makes them and the congregations concerned more relaxed about the problem of support for the pastors. The pastors are not underpaid as was often the case previously, and there are no rich lay people who pay more and thus wield greater power. This is part of the kind of freedom which the churches in China are enjoying. No longer dependent on rich, foreign bodies, they are not subject to control from outside. Their reason for existence is that they are called to mission, in their own given situations, and they are not worried whether they have enough resources to carry it through. No one can call Christianity in China a foreign religion now (*yang-jiao*), because the churches there are not dependent on foreign support and certainly not subject to foreign control. They are on their own now, financially, administratively and spiritually.

Secondly, the Chinese Christians' participation in nation-building enlarges the meaning of their selfhood. Beginning with the early years of 1950s, the clergy were compelled by a socialist ideology as well as for economic reason to work with their hands to participate in production. The change must not have been easy. But the experience has given the clergy firsthand knowledge of what it means to build up the nation. The experience also reduces the distance between the clergy and the laity. Practically all the able-bodied adults, men and women, take part in productive work. Sincere Christians are with the rest. To the extent that the Christians are accepted by non-believers as fellow-workers, they have ready-made opportunities to witness to their faith. As a community of believers, they not only reinforce one another in their Christian identity, but they achieve a greater measure of selfhood in so far as they can live their faith amongst fellow-citizens. The testimony of Cao Shengjie, who is now an Associate General Secretary of the China Christian Council, is revealing:

Previously I worked as a pastoral worker in the church. My only contact with those outside the church was as objects of evangelization. It seemed I always assumed a higher status. During the Cultural Revolution, I worked in a factory for eight years. This was a completely new life for me. It took more than ten of us co-operating in the workshop to complete the days' duties. I was just an ordinary worker in the collective. We worked together. We exercised, rested, studied, laughed together and became true friends. There was a childless solitary old worker who contracted cancer. Some workers and myself requested that the factory authorities not only pay for his hospitalization but also arrange special care for him so that he could die in peace ...At the factory, I never kept my faith a secret. I feel that factory life helped me grasp more deeply why, at Jesus's birth, the angels first announced the good news to shepherds tending to the flocks. Jesus's exhortation to "preach the Gospel to the poor" has a deep significance for us. At the same time, I discovered that the workers understood me and because of this, began to come into contact with the reality of Christian faith. When the churches were reopened, some people said to me, "Is it all right if we go to church with you?" Of course they were welcome.³

Ms. Cao's testimony can be duplicated a thousand times by Christians who have worked alongside the rest of the population. It is not only in factories and farms that the Christians can witness to their faith; they can do so also in their participation in CPPCC and in their neighborhoods. In the hundreds of reopened flourishing churches, the one-time factory or farm workers who were ordained before are back to the full-time ministry. In the socialist setting of PRC (in spite of the many economic problems that need attention), these ministers as well as the newly ordained ministers will not likely separate themselves from the rest who make up the productive force of the country.

I cannot leave the subject of selfhood without saying that the Christians in China are at the threshold of a period when, already quite secure in their footing, they are ready to enter into partnership with churches overseas who can treat them as equals in sharing resources, financial and personnel. It takes sensitivity and wisdom on the part of all parties to make the joint ventures work, thus opening a new chapter in the history of the Church in China as a part of the Oikumene.

Working out Patterns of Unity

TSPM did not consciously set out to achieve unity among the Protestants. The Manifesto of 1950 did manage to obtain as many as 400,000 signatures. If the signatories cut across denominational lines, that was because they were also

concerned about something which they considered to be important. The breaking down of denominational barriers was not so much a conscious aim as a by-product. As a matter of fact, even the 400,000 signatures represented but a fraction of the active Protestants, for there were numerous Christians who did not want to join anything led by TSPM, and there were others who did not understand the Manifesto or anything the TSPM did. In the early days of TSPM, unity was not its primary concern, nor was unity achieved in any notable sense.

By the mid-1950s, because church attendance was in decline and many pastors went to work to earn a living, many churches closed down, and the few that remained open became interdenominational in order to consolidate resources. In Beijing sixty-five places of worship were reduced to four. By 1958 in Nanjing and Guangzhou also only four churches were kept opened, with an interdenominational staff in each case. The administration of church properties and church funds was left in the hands of the Three-Self committee in a given city. The experience of voluntarily working together across denominational lines has certainly promoted unity. Denominational ties were of foreign origin anyway. Insofar as the churches in China cut their ties with the West, there was no reason for them to take denominational structures seriously. So when churches were reopened one after another, it would be unthinkable to go back to the old denominational patterns. We have here the making of the “post-denominational” era in Chinese Protestantism.

In the meantime, countless groups have been meeting in the homes or other places for prayer and Bible study: before the Cultural Revolution, during the period, and even to this day. It is impossible to estimate how many such groups there are. It is too simplistic to divide the Protestant situation in China between the “TSPM churches” and “house churches” (both misnomers!). It is difficult to generalize about the group meetings. However, it may be noted that at the grassroots level in China there has been a growth of such smallish groups, resembling something like “basic Christian communities” that are flourishing in Latin America and elsewhere, with little formal organization. These groups apparently are meeting the spiritual needs of people at the grassroots.

Coming back to the theme of unity, we should say that, under the leadership of Dr. K. H. Ting, ecumenism within Protestantism in China, in the first instance, and ecumenical relations beyond China, in the secondary instance, has increasingly been received with great concern. This paper is primarily concerned with unity within Protestantism. We have already seen that TSPM serves as the institutional rallying point for Chinese Protestants who are willing to meet political forces. Since 1980 the China Christian Council (CCC) has been created (replacing the Chinese National Christian Conference), seeking to serve all churches and all Protestant Christians throughout the country in their ministry. To this end, CCC has the objective to unite all Protestant Christians. For pastoral as well as theological reasons, unity is a high priority for Protestant Christianity in China today. It is interesting to note that TSPM and CCC are

parallel organizations, with many people serving on committees of both. Dr. K. H. Ting is both the Chairman of the Standing Committee of TSPM and the President of that of CCC. This suggests that Christian unity, both in relation to the state and in pastoral and theological regards, is highly important.

Fundamental to post-denominational Protestantism in China is that mutual respect has been a guiding principle agreed upon by church people coming from different denominational backgrounds. Denominational ties are still there, but they are mediated through the spirit of mutual respect. Mutual respect was in fact inserted in the 1954 Constitution of TSPM. H. H. Tsui, one-time General Secretary of the Church of Christ in China, made an important statement of mutual respect:

The most distinctive feature of our unity is that it is based on the principles of mutual respect in matters of faith. We are all aware that although there are many different schools of theology within Christianity, our faith is yet fundamentally the same. The reason we must have mutual respect, therefore, is that among Christians, the knowledge, understanding and experience of this similarity in matters of faith varies in intensity, in depth and in emphasis. Put in another way, this means that the faith of each denomination or group preserves “small differences” within a “great unity.”⁴

A concrete example of the principle of mutual respect is the permission of both baptism by immersion and baptism by sprinkling in the same congregation. Besides baptism, the same spirit of mutual respect can work and has worked eminently. Chinese churchmen are allowed to show diversity in theological thinking within a certain parameter. The outer limits of the parameter may be seen in the creed-like four-point statement of faith expected of students entering Nanjing Theological Seminary:

1. All Scripture is inspired by God (*Shen*). It includes everything necessary for salvation and is the basis of the Christian’s faith and the standard of conduct.

2. The one God (*Shangdi*) is the creator of all things and the Father of mankind full of justice and love.

3. Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became flesh and was crucified in order to save humanity, who rose from the dead to become head of the Church and savior of the whole world.

4. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the source of regeneration and sanctification and, in the church, gives believers every kind of grace.⁵

Within such a vast parameter, many thinking Chinese Christians would have no difficulty in showing mutual respect on matters of faith, for most Chinese are not dogmatists. However, on one particular issue, namely the episcopacy and ordination, heated debate can be expected. Not that there cannot be

diversity of opinion on the issue, but when that issue becomes a crucial one for ecclesiology, the debate will assume special intensity. For there is as yet no well defined Church of Christ in China as such. But the church order and ecclesiological questions cannot be put off too long. Is there a Chinese approach to these matters? I hope so.

The problem of including in the Protestant family those who are more dogmatic in temperament is not simple. "Dogmatic" may not be the accurate term to describe a cluster of groups who may be called the "rightists" theologically speaking. These individuals and groups include the fundamentalists, who read the Bible literally and make a fetish of the written word. The outlook of the fundamentalists is accordingly highly restricted. Yet among the "rightists" are also some who are idiosyncratic, rejecting anything objectively defined, and hanging on to their own versions of truth. If the "rightists" have anything in common, it is their extreme individualism, refusing to have anything to do with a larger institutional structure; a certain closed-mindedness, not recognizing any point of view different from theirs; and tendency to separate themselves from the world. China abounds with individuals and groups who can be so characterized. In some instances, heretical tendencies can be seen, e.g., "The Yellers." In many cases, the stated religious beliefs do fall within such limits as the Nanjing four-point statement mentioned earlier, but they probably want to add more strict qualifications of their own, to the extent that they refuse to recognize as true believers those who disagree with them. Generally speaking those who may be called "the rightists" are very difficult for CCC to deal with. Yet it would be a mistake to draw a hard and fast line to separate these groups from the rest. Some individuals who formerly belonged to the "Little Flock," an indigenous group established by Watchman Nee, now play an active role in TSPM committees. Wang Zhen, who was formerly Wang Mingdao's associate, was vehemently opposed to TSPM, but now actively supports TSPM and CCC. He said, "I have changed, and Three-Self is also in the midst of change. Nothing in the world remains static and unchanged. However, regarding my faith in the Bible and salvation in Christ, I have not changed."⁶

Let us return for a moment to the grassroots groups that have mushroomed. If it is true that the Protestant population in China has risen from approximately 900,000 in 1949 to an estimated 3 million today, the informal groups that have met in the homes and other places besides the churches have undoubtedly played a significant role in evangelistic work.

It is simply untrue to say that the "house churches are all against TSPM. The studies of Raymond Fung⁷ and the extensive contact made by my colleague at Tao Fong Shan, Deng Zhaoming,⁸ point to a highly fluid situation. What is most interesting is that the grassroots groups in various places are now evolving different patterns of organization, however informal. Although no organized, nationwide movement as such is afoot, there is the felt need among clusters of gatherings or "meeting points" to relate to one another and to forge ahead. In

some situations Deng Zhaoming came to know, the people concerned are not set against CCC and it is quite possible that CCC can come in here to lend a helping hand to tie the loose ends together for the sake of nurture as well as outreach. This is part of the task of unity that CCC will be increasingly called upon to give attention to.

If there is one final word about the internal ecumenical situation in Chinese Protestantism today, it is that diversity is allowed within some semblance of unity. It is a rather healthy and hopeful situation. There is no permanent schism as such except for some clearly heretical groups. A good deal of work still awaits to be done to achieve full unity, and the people concerned have to work hard at it, with the help of the Holy Spirit. But what is already manifest is remarkable. It is as good as anywhere else in Christendom today.

Theological Ferment

Theologians and churchmen in the West are eager to know if new Chinese theology is in the making. If new theology refers to a system of theology which is a brand new creation such as the Christian world has not seen before, then no such thing is as yet in the offering from China. But if we mean by new theology some fresh reaffirmation, expressed in a thoughtful way, of what is already in Christian beliefs, then things are happening in the Chinese churches, well worth the attention of Christians in other parts of the world. Let me here simply share some personal observations.

1. From the Chinese Christians' experience more than anything else, one gets the hint that theology, thought about God, is a touch of divine folly. Every time I visited an overflowing church in China during the last five years, I felt what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "My brothers, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are men of wisdom, by any human standard; few are powerful or highly born. Yet, to shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness..." (I Corinthians 1:26-31). The ageing pastors in the Chinese churches would be the first ones to admit that they are not worthy to be the ones to have something to say to the multitudes who are hungry for the Word of God. It is precisely in their weakness that they make the divine folly convincing, i.e., the folly that the divine would deign to come to the lowly, like the not very learned pastors and the common folk who do not know much but who are eager to hear the word of wisdom from God. At the "A New Beginning" Conference at Montreal, 1981, one of the resounding notes was struck by Zhao Fusan when he said, "We are weak, yet we are strong." If someone cares to collect the thoughts, sermons and meditations of the pastors and theological teachers in China, one would find plenty of materials to vivify the marvellous idea of "divine folly," which is in Paul and at the heart of our basic Christian faith, but which is often missing in learned

theological treatises.

2. In the recent resurfacing of the Church, more vibrantly than ever, the theme of resurrection is convincingly pronounced. The darkest days of the Cultural Revolution must have been dark indeed. It was not famine or war, but rather a total eclipse of moral values, whereby lawlessness, distrust, fraud, cynicism were the order of the day. The churches were practically all closed down. From the outside, we thought the Church was all dead and buried. But she has risen! We are here using metaphorical language, but the Chinese Christians have undergone real transforming experiences. Resurrection would be a right word for that. Pastor Shen Yifan, speaking in the Montreal Conference in 1981, said that resurrection is a theme that does speak to churches in China.⁹ What we must keep saying to him and the Chinese Christian leaders is, "Tell us more about the resurrection theme, not only in your sermons but in your writings. If you can, don't just repeat the words in the New Testament and don't just retell the stories in the Gospels. Tell us in words that rephrase what resurrection means in relation to the darkness you went through as well as to the hope you now see. Moreover, say it in such a way that it speaks to the common human conditions." If some materials are forthcoming, we have valuable theological writings in our hands.

3. Radical social changes witnessed in mainland China will increasingly encourage Christians to come up with a new theology of the secular. As said earlier in this paper, the Communist Revolution in China is nothing short of cataclysmic. No doubt, bloodshed and destruction have resulted. Are there constructive accomplishments and changes for the better also? Surely we can see the positive side of things too. But our interest here is not so much in working out a balance sheet as in seeing God at work in the world, showing His judgment as well as mercy, and, above all, the surprises He brings. Almost anyone has seen at one time or another the judgment and mercy of God in the world, but what makes the contemporary Chinese scene special is that Communism is not supposed to leave any room for God or that Christians do not expect God to show up at all in the Communist world. So if God is at work in Communist China, that comes as a surprise. It is this element of surprise which urges the Chinese Christians to rethink afresh the theology of the secular world. Reference was already made earlier to the surprising opportunities for Christians to identify, even for the non-believers, the signs of God in the workaday world. Related to a rethought theology of the secular is a revitalized theology of the laity, which the Chinese Christians are in an eminent position to do, simply because they are obliged to work side by side with the rest with no distinction between the "saved" and the "unsaved," the sacred and the secular. It is this immersion in the world which is forcing the traditionally theological "conservatives" out of their privatized world and is thus bringing them and the "liberals" together in recognizing both the sinfulness in the world as well as its redeemability. Returning to the element of surprise, what can be more surprising than seeing that theistic Christianity is growing in an avowedly

atheistic state? Wait. Lest the Christians be too proud, 5 or 6 million Christians (Protestants and Catholics) are but a small fraction in a population of 1 billion. Ah, here is a challenge to the theological minds in China to wrestle with. How dare would a tiny minority of Christians in a vast sea of humanity speak of God as the Lord of history or Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of the world or the Savior of mankind? Sooner or later, the Chinese theologians have to take up the challenge, for in the depth of their being they do make those wonderful affirmations about God and Jesus Christ, even though they in fact belong to a very small minority. When they come up with something, they have a theology well worth reading.

4. There are all the indications that Chinese Christians in the days to come will have something to say about “theology of spirituality.” Those words are put in quotation mark for lack of an exact nomenclature. Several things come to mind. First, whoever has the eye of faith sees that nothing less than the Holy Spirit is at work in china to promote growth in the Christian community. Second, there is always a strong streak of inward pietism among Chinese Protestants, but this pietism is now enriched and deepened both by their suffering and their hope and joy into a more vibrant piety. Third, what inward piety that the Chinese Christians already have will be further correlated with a theology of the secular. And fourth, piety or spirituality as an inward state alone is not enough; the discipline of theological discernment is important too. To sum up, we are reminded of something which Zhao Fusan once said, that the Chinese Christians have always had spirituality all right, but they need theological thinking, too.

Conclusion

What else can we say about the future? I am tempted to say more. One can list a host of problems and challenges facing the churches in China: pastoral leadership and theological education, Christian nurture and evangelism in a state jealous of religious growth, religious liberty and prophetic criticism. And whereas one person maybe exceedingly cautious about the church situation, another maybe much more hopeful. But it is really not necessary to ruminate or speculate more.

Looking back on what I have just written, my own attitude is guided by four principles: (1) by all means learn as much as we can from the past, (2) grasp the present as realistically as possible, (3) stand firm in the faith of the Church, (4) be open to the future.

Notes

1. See Ng Lee Ming, "A Study of Y. T. Wu," *Ching Feng* 151 (1972) 31-37.
2. These Documents and messages, translated into English, are published in Documents of the Three-Self Movement, ed. by Francis P. Jones, NCCC-USA, 1963.
3. Cao Shengjie, "Christian Witness in New China," *CAA Consultation with Church Leaders from China*, p. 35.
4. *Tian Feng*, 464 (16 May 1955), p. 346.
5. I am indebted to Philip Wickeri for calling attention to this statement. He also noted the different Chinese terms for God used in the statement—*Shen* and *Shangdi*—in two different sentences.
6. *Ching Feng*, XXVI (August 1983), p. 151.
7. Raymond Fung, *Households of God on China's Soil*, World Council of Churches, 1982.
8. "Spontaneous Growth of Rural Christian Communities: Jiangsu" and "Emerging Structures of Grassroots Christian Communities: Hubei." *Bridge* 6 (July 1982).
9. Shen Yifan, "How New China Helps Christians Think Anew Theologically," in: *A New Beginning*, ed. by Theresa Chu and Christopher Lind, Canadian Council of Churches, 1983.