

**The Future of the Church in China:
Why China's House Churches will Prevail**
by Luke Wesley¹

When Christians from North America or Europe visit the Holy Trinity Church in Kunming, China, the architecture of this beautiful, stately structure immediately reminds them of home, of traditional churches in the West. It even has a steeple. The atmosphere of quiet reverence will also seem familiar to western visitors, especially to those with roots in mainline Protestant churches. They will also recognize virtually all of the hymns. Of course, most Westerners will not understand the Mandarin lyrics, but the music will immediately call to mind the well-known verses of these historic songs. The choir will also sing tunes that are comfortably familiar. The visitors will very likely hear a clear, biblical message that reflects a more conservative theology than that found in most mainline pulpits in the West.² The closing prayer will be uttered by a member of the TSPM clergy,³ a select group trained in seminaries modeled after their western counterparts and appointed to lead virtually every segment of church life. The worship service will almost certainly end without any specific call for response on the part of the members of the congregation apart from silent prayer. The conclusion will thus mirror the fact that the congregation has little or no opportunity, apart from singing the prescribed hymns, to participate in the service. In short, Christians from mainline churches in the West who visit this church or other urban, TSPM churches in China, will be quite comfortable, for it will all seem very familiar.

When Westerners participate in a house church service, their experience will be different. They will likely enter into a city apartment

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²Since 2018 the Chinese government has increasingly sought to tighten its grip on religious affairs, so the extent to which this generalization reflects current reality could change. For more on this see my forthcoming *Themelios* article, "Church-State Relations: Lessons from China" (August, 2022).

³TSPM stands for "The Three-Self Patriotic Movement," the organization that oversees and unites the government-sanctioned churches of China. There is also a parallel organization called the "China Christian Council," but there is much overlap in both the leadership and the functions of these groups. For the purposes of this paper will refer to the TSPM to designate the churches recognized and sanctioned by the Chinese government and the leadership structure that governs and unites these churches.

or a village home. They will be greeted by a group of ten to twenty believers, possibly more. When the service starts, they will quickly be surrounded by the sounds of lively, earnest singing. The songs will flow from music quite different from anything that they have ever heard. The lyrics, if they were able to understand them, would seem equally strange. They highlight themes from what appears to be another world. Utilizing largely rural imagery, the lyrics evoke a world of struggle and persecution, sacrifice and mission, courage and hope. The service will include the sharing of testimonies and prayer requests. This is a time that inevitably culminates in corporate prayer. Everyone is given an opportunity to contribute; everyone is expected to participate. The preaching that follows will center on a passage from the Bible and seek to apply this text to the life of the believers. This biblical message typically will be followed by much discussion. Various members of the church will share what they feel God is saying to them through this message. The service will often conclude with a specific call to action and always with prayer. After the service has concluded, the believers will share a meal and joyful fellowship. In short, it will all seem very different from traditional church services back home. The nature of the music, the structure of the service, the expectation that everyone participates, the character of the message, the discussion that follows, and the intimacy of the fellowship will all take visitors from the West by surprise. The visitors will recognize that they are in the presence of believers, but the unique (and, perhaps, if they are astute, the uniquely Chinese) character of what has taken place will be very clear.

The contrast between typical worship experiences in TSPM churches and their house church counterparts could not be more striking. Whether one attends a TSPM church in Kunming or Beijing, the experience will be remarkably similar to many Protestant worship services around the world. However, when visitors from the West attend a house church service, while they may never know exactly what to expect (each house church has its own distinctive flavor), they can rest assured that their experience will be quite different from past experiences of worship in traditional mainline churches. In the midst of the diversity that characterizes the house church settings, one constant unifies: the service will reflect the musical styles, the felt needs, and the familial relationships that characterize the Chinese context.

This is the real beauty, in my opinion, of the house church movement in China: it allows for the rich diversity that characterizes the body of Christ, and it does so in an authentically Chinese way. Worship in the house churches is more diverse in nature than in the TSPM churches, and it is also much more indigenous. A “one size fits all” approach to church life simply cannot contain the wonder and beauty of

the body of Christ, globally or in China. This is true of worship styles, but it is also true of theology and church structure. It is especially true when the apparent uniformity is forced and contrived.

The artificial and contrived nature of the TSPM churches' "post-denominational unity" was illustrated for me in vivid fashion by a friend, Pastor Huang, who pastors a local house church.⁴ Pastor Huang is associated with the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF), one of the larger house church networks in China. Pastor Huang told me that early in 2016 the leader of the CGF, Uncle Shen, met with the President of China, Xi Jin Ping. In this conversation, Xi Jin Ping purportedly asked Uncle Shen, with respect to the government's policy toward Christianity, which of three paths he would prefer China to travel. The first path would eliminate the TSPM and only allow for house churches. The second path would allow for both the TSPM and the house churches, with each on equal footing. The third path would call for the house churches to become a part of the TSPM. Apparently, Uncle Shen answered, "Not path one, not path three, but path two is my preference."

I must admit that I am skeptical of this story's veracity. Certainly, recent events suggest that Xi Jin Ping and his government have no desire to allow the house church movement to compete on equal footing with the TSPM. If the new regulations governing religious activity may serve as our guide,⁵ it is apparent that China's leaders are intent on restricting further the limited space that currently exists within China for house church groups to operate. Nevertheless, I find this story interesting because it raises an important question: What would happen if the TSPM and the house churches were actually allowed to exist on equal footing? The reality is that if this were to happen, the TSPM churches would experience tremendous change or they would cease to exist. Let me put it another way, when the dust settles and the Chinese church is allowed to openly pursue its own path, the TSPM churches will be radically transformed. They will follow a more indigenous model, that of the house churches, in structure, in theology, and in practice, or they will largely fade away.

In this essay I want to explain why I feel this to be the case. More specifically, I will describe why I believe the house church movement reflects a more indigenous expression of the faith in China and, as a result, why I believe that it ultimately will prevail. I will do so by

⁴Throughout this article I often use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my sources.

⁵Carey Lodge, "Is Religious Freedom in China Really About to Get Worse," http://www.christiantoday.com/article/is.religious.freedom.in.china.really.about.to.get.worse/972_96.htm (accessed on January 7, 2017).

comparing the TSPM churches and the house churches in three key areas: church structure, theology, and worship patterns.

Church Structure

The TSPM

About six years ago a student at the local TSPM seminary approached me and asked if I would be willing to mentor and teach him. He was frustrated by his courses at the local TSPM seminary. He feels that the seminary's "post-denominational" curriculum, which describes various positions on theological topics (e.g., Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.), is confusing for young students. The various positions, which appeared to him to be contradictory at times, left most students confused and bewildered. "They don't know what they should believe," he stated. This young man yearns for a tradition, a clear and consistent body of doctrine, upon which to base his ministry. So, he came to me and said, "I want to know what you believe."

My friend also noted that many within the TSPM are now openly saying that they made a mistake in following the "post-denominational" route. Indeed, he said that there is a "*hui gui chuan tong*" ("back to tradition") movement that is calling for a reconnection with the denominational traditions of the past and their corresponding churches abroad. In short, many are fed up with the restrictions, the coerced and artificial uniformity, and the entrenched mimicking of the western Christianity of a previous era, yet without any real freedom or substance. Many are frustrated with the seminaries and their training methods that are devoid of any clear doctrinal stance. As a result, my friend thinks that there will be a significant break on the part of many from the TSPM. It may be that many churches will simply leave. It appears that a number of Christians are ready to be more open about their disapproval.

This story highlights an important fact. The post-denominational unity of the TSPM church is artificial. It is forced and contrived. The "unity" of the church is imposed through a strong, hierarchical institutional structure. This structure is maintained by carefully limiting the way that church leaders are selected and trained.

The path for becoming an ordained, TSPM minister is extremely narrow. A prospective minister must, above all, study at a TSPM seminary. This is tremendously limiting since educational levels in the countryside are often too low for admission, the prospective student must have recommendations from a TSPM pastor and thus prior experience in a TSPM church, and the number of students admitted into TSPM seminaries each year is ridiculously low due to government restrictions.

After graduation, the young believer often serves an apprenticeship in a designated church under designated leadership. Given the mixed character of the TSPM, this can be a very challenging experience for earnest young believers. Finally, the ministerial candidate must be viewed as acceptable by both church and government leaders in order to be ordained.

A leading TSPM pastor once told me about his own struggles navigating the complexities of life in the TSPM. He described a number of the challenges that he, an Evangelical minister, faced as he sought to follow God's call on his life within the confines of the TSPM. As he considered all of the struggles that he had faced, he said the greatest was this: he was compelled to ordain pastors that he knew should not be ordained. Clearly, this minister found that spiritual qualifications were not enough or even primary considerations for leadership within the TSPM.

With these factors in mind, we can understand why so many gifted young believers gravitate to house church settings. Here is an environment where they can exercise leadership gifts without going through a rigorous process that in most cases is not open to them anyway. Many opportunities to explore and develop their sense of calling are available in small group settings. And, while underground training opportunities are increasingly available to house church Christians, strong emphasis is placed on practical ministry. This tends to foster and strengthen the development of spiritual gifts. In the house church, anyone may emerge as a leader. The only qualifications are spiritual in nature.

It is important to note that TSPM churches tend to be dominated by the clergy. They do not feature participation or ministry on the part of the laity. If possible, professional clergy always lead the Sunday worship services. Furthermore, small group meetings where lay leadership might be encouraged and developed are often not tolerated. Meetings must take place at designated places, at designated times, and with designated leadership. This limitation seriously impacts the life of the church, for these are precisely the contexts where gifts of the Spirit might be exercised and the body built up.

The House Churches

The house churches are very, very different. Virtually everyone participates and anyone may contribute a song, a testimony, or a prayer. When I attend TSPM churches I am always encouraged, but generally I know that I will not be an active participant in terms of edifying the larger

group.⁶ When I attend a house church service, I always go with a sense of expectancy, knowing that I will have many opportunities to share, to pray, and to encourage others.

These contrasts are not unique to the churches of China. Many traditional and state churches around the world insist that their ministers go through a rigid path of professional training. They also emphasize a clear path of hierarchical authority that features accountability. This kind of institutional approach may foster stability, but it also encourages conformity and stifles flexibility, creativity, and risk-taking. Fundamentally, the ministry is often viewed differently: it is seen as a profession to pursue rather than a calling to follow.

The ethos of the house church movement is noticeably different. We may sum up by saying that the house churches are the “free market capitalists” in the economy of church life in China. Rigid control from a central bureaucracy is generally not possible and rarely tolerated; rather, the calling, gifting, and vision of every believer is affirmed and encouraged. Churches are thus planted with little or no encouragement or financial support from denominational or network leaders, often by surprising people with a strong sense that God has called and empowered them for the task at hand. It matters not if they are young, unschooled, or female. Their call and their spiritual gifting are paramount.

Some time ago house church leaders from two different networks met together in my home. It was fascinating to watch how these leaders interacted with one another. Three key questions were asked. It was apparent that these three questions touched upon matters they viewed as significant and foundational for church leadership. First, they asked about their conversion experience. Second, they wanted to know about their call to ministry. Finally, they asked about their experience of persecution (that is, their time in prison). Their conversion, their call, and their suffering – these were the marks of a true minister. I could not help but compare this list with the list of qualifications we generally look for in church leaders in the West. There was something very basic, very compelling, and very New Testament about their approach. It was all reminiscent of Acts 4:13, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Christians in the house church movement see this life-transforming encounter with Jesus as the essential ingredient for effective ministry.

⁶Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule. I have found that rural churches, even those associated with the TSPM, are often quite independent and appear to experience more freedom. This is especially true of churches comprised of minority (i.e., not Han) believers in remote regions.

Since other qualifications fade into insignificance by comparison, everyone is potentially a pastor, evangelist, or missionary.

Many in the TSPM point to the obvious risks inherent in this rather loose approach to church structure. An emphasis on strong, visionary leaders easily can lead to “apostolic” authoritarianism.⁷ This danger is somewhat mitigated by the emphasis on the gifts and calling of every member in the congregation. However, tensions between strong leaders can often lead to division and church splits. What about the obvious potential for schism? This is certainly a natural and perhaps inevitable consequence of the house church movement’s more organic, charismatic approach to church life. Yet this weakness also contains within it an important strength. While churches tend to become more bureaucratic over time, the seeds for renewal are always germinating and ready to burst forth into fragrant life.

There is also another important point that should be noted. The house church meetings and structure, with their emphasis on participation, relationships, fellowship meals, and a pragmatic approach to leadership, fit the Chinese context beautifully. It reminds me of a comment that a house church leader once made. We were discussing church life in China and he noted, “We meet in house groups out of a sense of necessity. However, when things change and we have more freedom, I sure hope we don’t lose this.”

Theology

The TSPM

The theology of the TSPM churches, especially at the grassroots, tends to be conservative and Evangelical. Many might find this hard to believe, but it is nevertheless true. This being the case, it would appear that here we might find significant similarities between the TSPM and the house churches. While this is often the case, there are still important differences.

Perhaps the most significant difference is the fact that the TSPM leadership and the leading TSPM seminary in Nanjing, in striking contrast to the majority of believers who sit in the pews, have been strongly influenced by liberal Protestant thought in the West. The best

⁷In his book on the charismatic movement in Britain, Nigel Scotland chronicles a litany of problems related to authoritarian tendencies in church leadership. Although past extremes appear to have sobered the movement and much progress has been made, the abuse of “apostolic” authoritarianism is clearly a key concern for the future (*Charismatics and the Next Millennium: Do They Have a Future?* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995], see chapters 4 and 5). I understand why many might see the house church movement in China as susceptible to the same kind of problem.

example of this is Bishop Ding Guangxun, who for decades sought to impose the liberal perspectives he gleaned from his student days at Union Theological Seminary (New York) upon the Chinese believers under his supervision. Bishop Ding is perhaps best known and criticized for advocating “justification by love” rather than “justification by faith.” Ding clearly sought to downplay the distinction between Christians and non-Christians as well as the need for evangelism.

Some years ago I took a visiting overseas Chinese friend to the local TSPM bookstore to look at the various books on sale there. I saw about six copies of Bishop Ding’s most recent book (as I recall, a collection of his writings) on the shelf and suggested that my friend, who is a scholar and researcher, might be interested in buying one. He thought this was a good idea and added it to the small stack of books that we had accumulated.

When we attempted to purchase these books, the lady in charge of the store, the wife of a TSPM pastor, immediately told my friend that Bishop Ding’s book was not a good book and that he should not buy it. She proudly indicated that although the authorities forced them to put the book on the shelves and sell it, they had not sold any copies in the last month. In fact, she said that they had only sold a few copies in the past year. This earnest lady continued by explaining how she always warns unsuspecting believers that they should not buy this book for it contains many errors and false teaching. I responded by noting that my friend was a researcher and merely interested in Bishop Ding’s book for academic purposes. The lady in charge shrugged and indicated that this was acceptable. She made it clear, however, that she did not want new believers to be confused or to think badly of their bookstore because of Ding’s book.

This encounter illustrates how out of touch Bishop Ding was (he died in 2012) and his theology is with mainstream Christianity in China, even within the TSPM. However, it also illustrates the theological tensions that exist within the TSPM and reminds us that church leaders are often forced to promote ideas that they find harmful or dangerous.

Not long after this incident I bumped into a good friend of mine who happens to be a TSPM minister and leader. He described how he and other local TSPM leaders were supposed to promote “Bishop Ding Thought.” Thus, a local gathering of TSPM ministers in the province had been arranged. With a wink, however, he told me that they would not be featuring Bishop Ding’s theological agenda; rather, they would highlight other more edifying themes.

Here we see the nature of the challenge that many TSPM pastors face. They often have to serve under leaders and instructions that are rooted in a non-Christian, Marxist view of the world. These challenges

did not end with Bishop Ding's death. They are an ongoing part of life within the TSPM. Some years ago I spoke with a leader in one of the larger TSPM seminaries in China. This individual spoke of a contemporary movement within the TSPM that calls for the transformation of Christian theology so that it is more compatible with the prevailing ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This movement for theological revision not only follows in Bishop Ding's footsteps, it was also encouraged more recently by Wang Zuoan, a senior official for religious affairs. In 2014 Wang declared that "the construction of Christian theology should adapt to China's national condition."⁸

The call in TSPM circles to embrace a theology more amenable to the party line is in reality an attempt to steer Chinese believers away from their own conservative, Evangelical (and Pentecostal) roots and towards western liberal thought. In other words, the liberal theology espoused by TSPM leaders like Bishop Ding is far from indigenous. It is rather an attempt to impose unvarnished Protestant liberal thought from the West on the Chinese masses. Given the fact that China's ruling Communist Party has borrowed heavily from western thinkers such as Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, this fact should not surprise us. Nevertheless, this deviation from the strong, historical underpinnings and ethos of Chinese Christianity in lieu of advocacy of perspectives appropriated from the West is striking. The fact that these liberal theological views are largely alien to the Chinese context (both in terms of its history and culture) perhaps explains why they have not been readily accepted by the vast majority of the believers, even in the TSPM churches.

I conclude with one final example of the theological dissonance one finds in TSPM settings. In the summer of 2011 a friend, let's call him Brother Wang, told me that an urban TSPM church would be hosting a preaching competition. Brother Wang at that time was serving as a member of the church's ministerial staff. Brother Wang was excited about the preaching competition. This would be the first of its kind in our area. Christians from all over the province were preparing to come and participate in the preaching competition. A panel of judges, including the church's pastor and other church leaders, would award prizes. Four young men from the local church planned to participate,

⁸"China plans its own 'Christian Theology'," <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-28687520> (accessed on January 9, 2017). See also Jackson Wu, "'Sinicized Christianity' is Not Christianity," posted on March 20, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2019/03/20/sinicized-christianity-is-not-christianity/>, (accessed on Feb. 12, 2022.)

including Brother Wang, as well as many others from distant parts of the province.

Later, however, Brother Wang told me that he was disappointed. He had worked hard on his sermon, “My Hope is the Second Coming of Jesus.” When the local pastor heard the title of his sermon, he told Brother Wang that he should preach on another topic. The pastor said that although he did not have a problem with this topic, there would be a number of government officials in attendance. He indicated that many would find this topic problematic and thus it would inevitably have a negative impact on the judges. Brother Wang was clearly surprised by this turn of events and felt badly. He later left the TSPM church and returned to his house church roots.

When I heard Brother Wang’s story, it confirmed my own suspicions rooted in my experience in TSPM churches over the years. In all my years in China, I have yet to hear a sermon on the return of Christ in a TSPM church. I have always felt that there is a sort of unwritten policy in TSPM churches that pastors should refrain from preaching on this topic. The Marxist critique of Christianity has always emphasized that Christianity is “an opiate of the people” largely because it calls us to think of the future as well as the present and of other, spiritual realities rather than simply the physical realities that we can feel and see. Of course, Brother Wang’s topic reminds us that true hope and an eternal perspective have an important impact on how we live our lives today. China desperately needs this kind of hope and perspective, but sadly CCP leaders are often blind to this fact. Sadder even still is the willingness of some TSPM leaders to avoid preaching and teaching on this topic because of pressure from government officials.

The House Churches

Perhaps the clearest indicator that the TSPM churches and the house churches reflect significantly different theological orientations is their approach to evangelism and missions. The house churches live and breathe missions.

In 2010 a Chinese house church leader, Brother Zhang, spoke in the chapel of an “underground” Bible school affiliated with the house church movement. After an inspiring service, he met personally with Sister Ma, a Christian from a Muslim family and people group. Sister Ma explained that she felt called to take the gospel to her people. I still remember Brother Zhang’s words of exhortation. He told her there were “three fears” that she must overcome in order to share the gospel with her people. First, she must not fear “poor living conditions.” Second, she must not fear “difficult work” (that is, ministering among unresponsive

people). Finally, she must not fear “going to prison.” Brother Zhang concluded, “If you overcome these fears, the Lord will use you in a powerful way.” Sister Ma was encouraged by these sobering words.

This attitude of total abandonment to the purposes of God and His mission is also reflected in the songs that flow from and permeate the worship of the house church movement. I have included below my English translations of two songs found in Lu Xiaomin’s collection entitled, *Sounds of the Heart*. Lu Xiaomin and her songs are known and loved by house church groups throughout China. I asked one Chinese friend how many believers knew about these songs. He exclaimed, “All the house churches sing them!” *Sounds of the Heart* is an updated and expanded version of *Songs of Canaan*, Lu Xiaomin’s previous and hugely popular songbook. *Sounds of the Heart* contains 900 songs and is the closest thing to an “official” songbook that exists in the house churches in China today. In view of their popularity and impact, the songs penned by Lu Xiaomin are an important insight into Chinese Christianity. I have found them to be quite different from most Christian songs in the West, but powerful and full of inspiration. They are also intensely missional. I believe the following songs capture well the ethos of the house church movement.

We Do Not Fear Strong Wind and Rain

We do not fear strong wind and rain
 For the one with us is Jehovah
 We do not fear strong wind and rain
 For the one with us is greater than ten thousand
 We will not cast our nets in the narrow, shallow stream
 Nor will we cast our nets in the tranquil lake
 Small trees survive violent winds and savage rain
 They grow into tall trees that reach to heaven.⁹

We are an Invisible Army

We are an invisible army
 We are evangelists without names
 If God helps us, who can stand against us?
 ‘Charge forward’ is our battle cry
 The blood of martyrs spilled over thousands of years,
 Cries out to those of us who follow
 The throng of saints over thousands of years,
 In ragged clothes, drifting, yet not discouraged

⁹Lu Xiaomin, *Sounds of the Heart*, 455 (Song #404).

On the battlefield these soldiers were tested

In strong winds and waves these helmsmen were tried

In these last days we will face even greater trials

So we constantly ask the Lord for His guidance.¹⁰

By way of contrast, I have yet to see TSPM leaders at a high level openly talk about missions; that is, taking the gospel to other people in other cultural groups or nations. I have heard, however, many stories of how TSPM pastors who are too active or aggressive in reaching out to other communities are reprimanded and punished. Can a church that does not view missions (proclaiming the gospel to those who are not Christians, especially those who have not heard) as a central part of its purpose really be considered the church? Does it have a future?

Worship Patterns

The TSPM

The rural church was packed with people. They listened attentively as the minister, a Chinese pastor from Hong Kong with charismatic leanings, spoke passionately about the work of the Holy Spirit. A TSPM pastor and friend had brought us to this place to meet with local believers and speak to them. As the minister from Hong Kong came to the end of his sermon, he challenged the congregation to seek the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

He then did something that, in my almost 30 years of experience in the church in China, I have never seen a TSPM minister do. He called for anyone who wanted to be filled with the Spirit to come forward for prayer. The believers streamed down to the front of the church. The visiting minister then encouraged our TSPM pastor-friend and me to join with him as he prayed for the people who now filled the altar area. I joined him and together we began to pray with and for the believers. Many began to cry out and pray in loud voices.

I glanced at my TSPM friend, who was still standing in his place among the pews, and wondered how he would respond. I knew that what was happening was unique for most TSPM churches, which tend to shy away from any hint of emotion in their services. As the volume of prayer grew and the prayer time reached its climax, our TSPM friend strode to the front of the church and in a loud voice began to pray a concluding prayer. The message was clear: he was not comfortable with what was happening and felt that he needed to stop the meeting. The believers quickly dispersed back to their seats and the service came to an end.

¹⁰Ibid., 585 (Song #524).

Again, this story illustrates a striking difference between the TSPM and the house churches. The TSPM church lives with very real restrictions. The manner in which these restrictions are followed and enforced varies widely, depending on the local government and church leadership. But the restrictions are there nonetheless and they do impact the life of the church.

We have already noted that the government does influence the selection of leaders and it does restrict the settings in which the church can meet. But the government also influences the theology and practice of the church in a more subtle way. If compliance with government regulations is a key concern for church leaders, then will they not naturally be more controlling in their handling of church life? Will they not inevitably be less open to allowing Spirit-led people to engage in ministry for fear that they might break the rules?

Certainly, many ministers in traditional churches in the West are reluctant to give opportunity to untutored lay people to speak or exercise public ministry in the church. It is often viewed as simply too risky. However, when much more is at stake than simply suffering through an embarrassing moment or facing a disgruntled parishioner, how will leaders respond? Understandably, the context of church life in the TSPM encourages leaders to avoid taking what may be viewed as unnecessary risks. It encourages them to exercise more control.

This sort of posture, of course, puts them squarely at odds with believers who feel led by the Spirit to minister beyond the confines of the limitations imposed upon them. I have watched TSPM leaders struggle with how to deal with earnest, eager believers who feel led to engage in ministry or evangelism in ways considered illegal in China. It is not easy for these leaders to maintain their integrity as Christians and at the same time stay out of trouble. In this context, the temptation to avoid taking risks or to allow others to do so must be strong.

There are undoubtedly a variety of reasons for the largely controlling stance of TSPM churches, but one cannot avoid feeling that this characteristic of TSPM church life is exaggerated by the need to comply with government regulations. The government wants safe, reliable people controlling the church and its meetings, people that it can depend on not to cause problems or transgress the party line. In the TSPM, too much fire and fervency are problematic.

This assessment is supported by the conclusions and tone of perhaps the most significant work published on the Holy Spirit within TSPM circles, *The Work of the Holy Spirit (Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo)* by Jing Jiu Wei (TSPM of Hebei, 2002). Pastor Jing concludes with this warning:

“. . . the Chinese church blindly advances the cause of the charismatic movement. I still believe this is not appropriate, for if we compare the quality of the faith of Chinese believers with that of the overseas church, there is still a relatively big difference. There are still not enough [in China] who have grasped the truths of Scripture, and in this way, they seek the Holy Spirit without being watchful. My great fear is that they may go astray” (my translation of Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gongzuo*, 375).

One result of this conservative and controlling approach is a largely rational (non-emotional) approach to worship. I find this very uncharacteristic of Chinese people in general. The experience of the indigenous church movements prior to 1949 and the experience of contemporary Chinese churches in the large cities of Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan point in a different direction.¹¹

The House Churches

Once again, my experience in house church settings has been very different. House church services are marked by joyful worship, indigenous songs, testimonies, and fervent prayer. The songs, testimonies, and prayers are frequently spontaneous and initiated by lay believers. The services often result in strong, emotional responses. Crying, weeping, and emotionally charged prayers are not unusual. The most pervasive emotion, however, is generally a strong sense of joy. All of this is evident in the following description of one of my early experiences in a house church worship service.

Rays of sunlight sliced through the tall trees, bringing warmth and light to the hill that our group of fifty occupied. A gentle breeze blew across the face of the lake that stretched out before us. The lake’s quiet waters reminded us that the city was far away. But we were not here to enjoy the scenery. It was Easter morning. We had come to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord.

We found our place on the side of the hill as the musicians began to lead us in songs of praise. The time of worship was very special, as normally we were not all able to meet together. In a small apartment in

¹¹For similar observations, see Robert Menzies, “Pentecostals in China,” in Vinson Synan and Amos Yong, eds., *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future*, vol. I: *Asia and Oceania* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House Publishers, 2015), 67-90 and Menzies, *Making Pentecost Your Story: 50 Days of Reflection and Prayer – A Devotional Companion to Pentecost: This Story is Our Story Inspired by the Church in China* (Springfield, MO: The Asian Center for Pentecostal Theology Press, 2016).

the city space is limited and often the volume of praise must be contained. But now, together and out in the open, the joy was visible, almost tangible, and the praises rang. And then, as the worship reached its crescendo, as if one voice we all shouted in Chinese, “Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!”

At that moment I began to thank the Lord for the way in which he had led and blessed my family these past years. I was reminded that this service, this incredible scene, was an answer to prayer. To worship together with this wonderful group, to declare the reality of the resurrection surrounded by Chinese brothers and sisters—this was truly the fulfillment of a dream.

As the time of worship came to a close, two Chinese adults expressed their desire to commit their lives to Christ. A Christian brother, himself a government official, had brought them to the meeting. The two visitors were moved by the purity of the fellowship and the sincerity of the worship. They had also been challenged by the proclamation of the risen Christ. I had the joy of leading our two new friends in a prayer of repentance and consecration. When I opened my eyes, I saw their faces reflecting the new reality: they had entered into the kingdom of God.

After the service, we all gathered together to share a meal of fellowship. The believers brought a rich assortment of food—nothing is as varied and interesting as a Chinese meal. When the eating and conversations subsided, the group moved down to the lake and the baptismal service began. Songs and prayers punctuated the powerful testimonies of the fourteen people who were baptized that day. After each testimony, the waters rippled as young believers publicly declared their allegiance to Christ. Warm sunshine and a soft breeze greeted the Christians emerging from the water. It was Easter, a day to remember.

Conclusion

The future of the church in China is destined to follow the path established by the house churches. This is true in terms of church structure, theology, and worship patterns. Undoubtedly, there will be significant diversity. The “post-denominational unity” currently touted in TSPM circles will be revealed for what it is: contrived and forced. I see this diversity as a strength rather than a weakness. It is a natural expression of the richness of the body of Christ and its own distinctiveness. It is also a natural expression of the “not-yet” or “incomplete” nature of our present experience of God’s salvation. “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). This diversity, when coupled with recognition of the richness of the body of Christ, should be welcomed and celebrated.

This expression of church life will also be much more rooted in Chinese culture than that of today's TSPM churches. The music, preaching, and worship will be expressed in forms and ways that are authentically Chinese, not simply borrowed from the West. The structure of the church will be more organic, relational, and charismatic: the church will be viewed as a large family. The term *jia ting jiao hui* is actually more accurately translated "family church" rather than "house church." It is noteworthy that house church believers refer to their leaders with the term, "uncle." They also speak of fellow believers as their "brothers" and "sisters."

The theology of the Chinese church will be rooted in the Bible and have a strongly missional and pragmatic emphasis. The church will be marked by an emphasis on conversion, prayer for the sick, exorcism, joyful worship, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The church will view discipleship largely in terms of involvement in the mission of the church and the Chinese church will become a powerful force in cross-cultural missions.

If this vision of the future is realized, then the Chinese church will also face significant challenges. The path I envision is full of risk. It is a path that may lead to conflict with the government. It is a path that will likely lead to misunderstanding and ridicule. However, it is a path that follows closely in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles. I firmly believe it is a path that God will richly bless.

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