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Kuo, Cheng-tian

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‘We Are Good Citizens’

Tension between Protestants and the State in Contemporary China

Yen-zen Tsai

Abstract
The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sets up rules that restrict religious group’s activities. Since Xi Jinping became the president of the People’s Republic of China in 2012, suppression of the Chinese Protestant churches has intensified. In this chapter, I approach this church-state tension by examining key official documents about CCP’s religious policy and regulations as the context in which the tension arises. I also analyze important manifestos, petitions or theses recently produced by unregistered Protestant communities or individuals as responses to the state’s oppression. I argue that both CCP and the unregistered Protestants subscribe to a notion of religious nationalism but emphasize this notion differently and that this difference is a key factor underlying their present antagonistic relationship.

Keywords: Chinese Christianity, CCP, TSPM, house church, apologetics

Introduction
Benefiting from China’s Reform-and-Open policy implemented in 1978, Chinese Christians have in general enjoyed more religious freedom in the post-Mao era than before. This relative freedom, however, is fragile and precarious. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), based upon its atheist ideology, sets up rules and regulations that restrict the religious group’s activities. Violators or non-conformists are easily arrested and sentenced to imprisonment. Since Xi Jinping became the president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2012, suppression of the Protestant churches has intensified. This is especially marked by two kinds of repressive measure: the removal of the cross from the chapel roof or demolition of the church building and the arrest of human-rights lawyers, many of whom

are Protestants. \(^2\) During the national conference on managing religion held from 22 to 23 April 2016, Xi reaffirmed the correctness of the CCP’s theory about religion and its restrictive policy, insisting upon embracing a ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. \(^3\) Against observers who are optimistic about the irreversible progress of the opening up of religious policy in China, this sharp turn should alert us to the inveterate conflict between church and the Communist party-state. \(^4\)

Interactions between Chinese Protestants and CCP are complicated, and there are ways by which we can investigate them. In this chapter, I propose to approach the tension issue by examining two groups of literature. The first one is related to key official documents that stipulate CCP’s religious policy and rules and regulations. They tell the government’s basic position toward religious belief and religious activities. On one level, they reveal how CCP defines religion and where its core interest lies. On another level, they make clear the standard on the basis of which the government deals with the religious groups. The second one contains manifestos, petitions or theses produced by Chinese Protestant communities or individuals as responses to the party-state’s afflictions upon their faith. These apologetic writings are highly relevant and useful to our understanding of the subject because, as a ‘genre of testimony’, they show the ‘fundamentals of religious belief’ of a church community. They are salient markers that indicate this community’s boundary and ‘act as a membrane for the exchange of ideas’. \(^5\)

By juxtaposing these two sets of writings, one should be able to detect key elements surrounding the tension, to contrast their differences and similarities, and to explain the antagonism between them.

My chapter consists of three major parts. I start with introducing CCP’s religious policy and revealing its gist found in key official documents as the context in which the Chinese church-state tension arises. In the second section, I analyze some of the important Chinese apologetic writings generated in the recent decades, making clear where and why they oppose the official policy. In the last section, I discuss, on the basis of my findings, the fundamental stances of CCP and Chinese Protestants, and argue that both of them subscribe to a notion of religious nationalism. I further point out

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2 BBC (2016); Economist (2014); Los Angeles Times (2014); McKenzie (2014); Melchior (2016); UCA News (2016); Van Sant (2016).
4 Kindopp (2004); Lambert (2009); F. Yang (2012); Wielander (2009).
that their emphasis upon this notion diverges and that this divergence is a key factor underlying their antagonistic relationship.

CCP’s religious policy

On the national level, there are three important documents that spell out CCP’s definition of religion and prescribe how a religious group should act accordingly. ‘The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period’, first presented during the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in 1978 and publicized in 1982, and commonly named Document 19, sets the basic tone of CCP’s religious policy that has exerted a great influence in the following decades.6 Brought about immediately after the Cultural Revolution, the document repudiates the leftist extremism against religion in the previous years. Instead, it asserts the importance of coping with religion pragmatically with scientific theories. Based upon Marxist materialism, it regards religious manifestations, including religious beliefs, feelings, rites, and organizations, as social and historical products. They are destined to vanish, it affirms, once human development advances into socialism and communism. Before this happens, one has to deal with religion meticulously as it possesses protracted nature, complexity, and mass nature, three characteristics that may cause contradictions among the people.

According to Document 19, CCP’s basic policy ‘toward religious question is that of respect for and protection of the freedom of religious belief’.7 This seemingly positive attitude, however, is circumscribed by many subordinate clauses. Document 19 confirms people’s freedom to religious belief, but, at the same time, it advocates people’s right to reject religion and propagate atheism and anti-superstition. Further, it thus stipulates:

Religion will not be permitted to meddle in administrative or juridical affairs of state, nor to intervene in the schools or public education. It will be absolutely forbidden to force anyone, particularly people under eighteen years of age, to become a member of a church, to become a Buddhist monk


or nun, or to go to temples or monasteries to study Buddhist scripture. Religion will not be permitted to recover in any way those special feudal privileges which have been abolished or to return to an exploitative and oppressive religious system. Nor will religion be permitted to make use in any way of religious pretexts to oppose the Party’s leadership or the Socialist system, or to destroy national or ethnic unity.\(^8\)

What the document aims at is to instruct the religious believers, both clergy and laity alike, to be patriotic, observe the law, support socialism, and uphold national and ethnic unity, the strengthening of which contributes to the establishment of the united front. To achieve this purpose, it requires that religious groups follow CCP’s leadership; objection to this demand is deemed being disloyal to the party-state.

With respect to religious activities, Document 19 states that religious groups should act only at a site, either a temple, a chapel, or a mosque, licensed by the government. Activities conducted outside the designated area are in principle not allowed. All religious groups, based upon their respective religious tradition, should be associated with or incorporated into one of the eight national religious organizations that represent the five state-approved religions: the Chinese Buddhist Association, the Chinese Daoist Association, the Chinese Islamic Association, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Chinese Catholic Religious Affairs Committee, the Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference, the Chinese Protestant Three-self Patriotic Movement, and the China Christian Council. The party-state in this way consolidates different religious groups into authorized associations so that they, within the limit of constitution and law, can perform a positive function for the country.

It is significant to note that Document 19 defines religion in distinction from three areas that may cause confusion or overlapping. It first distinguishes religion from culture and custom, arguing that for the CCP members, to join the former is forbidden whereas to follow the latter as a traditional, social practice is conducive to ethnic unity. The document also differentiates between ‘normal religion’ (zhengchang zonjiao 正常宗教)

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8 MacInnis (1989, p. 15).
9 It is true that some provincial governments might, in consideration of their respective needs or situations, admit religions not within these five to be officially acceptable. For example, Russian Orthodoxy can be practiced in Heilongjiang and folk religion is permitted in Fujian. But it should be noted that they are not authorized on the national level and that to be practically admissible does not always mean they are legally guaranteed. See SARA (2000b, p. 41); Hsun Chang (chapter 13 of this volume).
and ‘abnormal religion’ (*buzhengchang zonjiao* 不正常宗教). By ‘abnormal religion’, it refers to criminal and anti-revolutionary groups and their activities in the guise of ‘religion’. Included in this category are sects branching off from popular religions and sorcerers and witches who capitalize on people’s ignorance for material gains. The document further stipulates that even for the five authorized religions, conducting activities on the principle of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation only is permitted. To cut foreign connections, either financial or organizational, and resist infiltration of hostile power from abroad makes clear an area where the domestic religions should stand; it simultaneously reveals how CCP defines religion out of political consideration.

The State Department of PRC issued the ‘Announcement Regarding Some Questions on Further Improving Work on Religion’, alternatively called Document 6, in February 1991. The document was formulated in the aftermath of and as a response to the June Fourth Incident in 1989 that had generated tremendous upheavals throughout China. Social stability was at the top of the PRC government’s agenda. As far as its attitude toward religion is concerned, the government set as its primary goal to persistently implement the policy of religious freedom, on the one hand, and, on the other, to more harshly control illegal religious activities. On the surface, Document 6 adds nothing but reiterates the main gist of Document 19. However, the tone it raises and the content it frames underline its importance in shaping the operation of the official religious administration. In view of some confusions, such as competing for leadership in the temple, mosque, and church and establishing unauthorized Buddhist and Christian seminaries to recruit students in local areas, this document calls for a clear-up in order to maintain continuity and stability of CCP’s religious policy.

Document 6 lays out its announcement in the order of six subtitles, all imperative sentences: (1) comprehensively and accurately implement the policy of religious freedom; (2) manage religious affairs according to the law; (3) fully expand the function of patriotic religious organizations; (4) resolutely strike down criminal activities in the name of religion; (5) strengthen work units and establish work teams of religious affairs; (6) strengthen CCP’s leadership in religious affairs. Under each subtitle, the document elaborates what to rectify and how to improve it with respect to

10 The Chinese original of this document can be obtained at http://CCP.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66704/4495639.html, last accessed 20 February 2016.

11 For an excellent exposition of the June Fourth Incident in relation to Document 6, see Ying (1999, pp. 36-44).
chaos among religious groups. For example, regarding implementing the policy of religious freedom, it affirms a citizen’s right to religious belief and demands rectification of abuses, if any. The purpose of this instruction, as explicitly stated, is to more conveniently unite the mass and enhance social stability. But when coming to the second instruction, ‘manage religious affairs according to the law’, it stresses the necessity of strictly supervising religious organizations and their activities and guarding against any illegal encroachments from either within or without. It is therefore obvious that the intention of Document 6, with a succinct frame of expression, is to bring religious believers or communities into alignment, a task CCP is highly concerned with in the process of social liberalization.

In line with the aforementioned religious policy and for the purpose of effectively realizing it in society, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) of PRC issued the ‘Regulations on Religious Affairs’ (RRA) on 1 March 2005. This document, in place of the simpler ‘Rules of Management for Religious Sites’, was originally intended to transcribe the instruction on religious policy by Jiang Zemin, then CCP’s general secretary, into concrete guidelines for the religious groups. SARA would have to make sure that Jiang’s ‘three sentences’, that is, ‘to thoroughly implement CCP’s religious policy, to tighten management of religious affairs according to the law, and to actively guide religion to adapt to socialist society’, could be observed and practiced. Now the RRA is comprehensive in content and thematic in presentation. There are forty-eight articles in total, divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 ‘General Provisions’ translates the main ideas of Document 19 and Document 6 into five articles, emphasizing the citizens’ constitutional right of religious freedom and the importance for them to abide by the law, uphold national and ethnic unity, and maintain social stability. It also makes clear that religious groups, on the basis of self-governing, should not be dominated by foreign power, and that local governments of all levels have the administrative duty to supervise them.

Chapter 2 ‘Religious Organization’ stipulates how religious groups should register with the local governments and conduct their activities, such as publication and establishment of school, according to regulations respectively specified. Likewise, Chapter 3 ‘Religious Site’ details where religious
groups can or cannot act and how the religious buildings should receive the government’s approval before construction and should be subject to regular inspection afterwards. Chapter 4 ‘Religious Personnel’ intends to identify the clergy and prescribe the contents of their activities, whereas Chapter 5 ‘Religious Property’ details the rules that govern the transaction of real estate of religious groups. Most restrictive of all the articles are those contained in Chapter 6 ‘Legal Responsibility’. They pertain to various possible conditions in which violators of rules are to be prosecuted by the court or penalized by the government’s supervisory offices. They thus pose much pressure on the religious groups, causing them to weigh the result carefully when engaging in religious activities. Chapter 7 ‘Appendix’ specifies how religious groups in the mainland should interact with their counterparts in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

The three documents introduced above demonstrate a relationship of continuity. Document 19 lays the ideological foundation of religion for post-Mao CCP, Document 6 strengthens it, and RRA transcribes it into rules and regulations that can be practically referenced in society. In addition to these documents, many other materials, officially promulgated in the form of talks, collections of reading, or textbooks, also serve to inform the religious believers about what religion is and how they should behave as practitioners.16 The explicit intention on the part of CCP is to highlight its official boundary from which it can interact with its religious citizens legally and practically.

Chinese apologetic writings

Document 19 and Document 6 might be landmarks that reflected CCP’s willingness to loosen up its control over religious groups in the post-Mao China. Their relative liberating effect, however, was not favorably received. Many Christians, particularly those affiliated with the unregistered ‘house churches’, stood up to resist the party-state’s religious policy and voiced against its concomitant rules and regulations. As Christian churches, notably those of the Protestant evangelical sort, expanded very rapidly, how to respond to their needs, such as recognizing their group status, finding proper meeting sites for their congregation, and training qualified theological students as prospective ministers, has become a thorny problem that often resulted in conflicts and discontents. It was common that local

governments treated the recalcitrant church members with physical coercion, and this ignited more protests and resentments in return. Against this background, leaders of four branches of Protestant house churches in north China together published two manifestos in November 1998, to make known their grievances: ‘Confessions of China House Churches’ and ‘Attitude of China House Churches toward the Government, Religious Policy, and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)’. The first manifesto concisely expresses their fundamental belief, and the second one, based upon this belief, speaks out their common stance vis-à-vis the secular authority. The two literary pieces are thus intimately related and should be evaluated as two sides of one entity.

The ‘Confessions of China House Churches’ reveals that unregistered Protestants in north China are theologically very conservative. They believe biblical inerrancy, affirming that as it was divinely inspired, the Bible should be literally understood and is the ultimate criterion and guidance for the Christian’s life. Their exposition of the Trinity and Christology basically follows the Nicaean Creed. In an appendix, they vehemently oppose the ‘heretic’ proclamation that Christ has returned in his second incarnation. To be reborn and saved, they assert, one has to repent, believe in Jesus as the Son of God who died for humanity’s sins on the cross and was resurrected from the dead, and receive the promised Holy Spirit. The Confessions indicates that these unregistered Protestants tend to be Pentecostal-charismatic, as they believe that receiving the Holy Spirit is the assurance of salvation and that speaking in tongues and working miracles are testimonies to God’s mighty acts.

More relevant to our interest is the ecclesiology elaborated in the Confessions. According to this literary piece, the church is composed of members called by Christ from various places, both domestic and international. It is thus the body of Christ and, as well, God’s house. All Christians worldwide belong to the same body, and they should be united in truth and in Christ. To manage the church, Christians should follow the biblical principles and should not be controlled and manipulated by any secular power, although, the Confessions adds, they should obey the constitution so far as legal
aspects are concerned. In three strong sentences, the section on ecclesiology ends in a high voice:

We oppose alliance or intermingling of church and politics; we oppose dependence on domestic and international political power for the development of the church; we object to the church’s involvement in activities that destroy ethnic and national unity.

That a church’s proclamation of its biblical doctrine would also include elements from the current political scene is unusual, but that is exactly what the unregistered Chinese Protestants purport to convey, in view of the highly politicized environment in which they live. To profess that they are politically unambitious at least precludes their being suspected of unpatriotic and, in a positive way, makes their religious purposes more salient. The second manifesto ‘Attitude of China House Churches toward the Government, Religious Policy, and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement’, reinforces the Confessions and straightforwardly cast their opinions against the secular authority. This apologetic writing begins with four statements as a prelude. They serve as an important premise upon which the Chinese Protestants assume they could engage in an effective dialogue with the government institutionally and ideologically. The unregistered churches, the statements proclaim, verify that they love the people and the country as they do the Lord and the church; they also uphold national unity and ethnic consolidation. They honor the constitution of PRC, political leaders, and the government as ordained by God. In an askew tone, they assert that they never betrayed any national interests and only did things beneficial to the people. Moreover, although misunderstood and persecuted, they never fought back either in attitude or in action.

The manifesto immediately turns to raise the first rhetorical question: ‘Why do we refuse to register with the government?’ It then presents five reasons as the answer, contending that the government’s current religious regulations contravene the biblical principles. It specifically pinpoints the so-called ‘three-fixeds’ (sanding 三定) policy as unbiblical: fixed site, fixed personnel, and fixed district. Countering these restrictions, it argues that to conduct activities at the designated site only clashes with the Lord’s teaching to hold fellowships anywhere in his name. To the rule that ministers licensed by the Religious Affairs Bureau exclusively are permitted to deliver sermons from the pulpit, it retorts that anyone called by God and authorized or commissioned by the church is entitled to preach. And with respect to the rule that a church minister is not allowed to conduct activities beyond
the boundary of a village or a province, it alludes to the Bible’s instruction that Christians should go to the end of the world to evangelize people and to establish churches.

The second reason why the house churches turn their back on the government is because the official policy forbids them to preach to people under eighteen. According to the Bible, the manifesto contends, Jesus commands his disciples to receive the little ones. CCP’s religious policy also forbids church ministers to pray for spiritual healing or practice exorcism, but this obviously denies the similar acts that Jesus performed. As to the rule that forbids the church to receive other church members from afar, it is against the biblical teaching that the church elders should not treat visitors coming from remote places with hospitality and kindness. The last reason why the house churches refuse to register is because the religious policy bans foreign connections. Against this, the manifesto answers that the church should be ecumenical; no distinction should be made among people of different ethnic backgrounds because Christ redeems all humans and calls them into one unity.

The manifesto proceeds to ask the second rhetorical question: ‘Why do we refuse to join the Three-self Patriotic Movement?’ To this question, it responds from five ideological and practical aspects, arguing in the oppositional mode of expression. The unregistered house churches accuse that TSPM is headed by the government and administers to the official religious policy, whereas they themselves respect Christ as their head and manage the church according to the biblical principles. This contrastive fact also applies to the different formations of clergy in the two camps. As TSPM was founded by Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗 and followed the liberal theology of social gospel, it has departed from the orthodox biblical teachings. The unregistered house churches, in contrast, build their foundation upon the Bible and inherit the fundamentalist and evangelical traditions. Henceforth the two organizations have treaded on two different paths: one, subject to the government, engages itself in political movements, whereas the other, maintaining the principle of separation between church and state, submits itself to God. In this context, TSPM sets tending the congregation inside the church as its main task, but the unregistered house churches take evangelical expansion as their great mission.

The manifesto admits that the Bible-centered orientation in theology and action may have to pay a high price, therefore it brings out into the open its attitude of being persecuted. In a nutshell, the unregistered house churches contend that it is not ethical and political problems that should cause the government’s suppression of them; by all accounts their members
are patriotic and morally upright. Rather, it is simply because they refuse to register with the local government and join TSPM that they have received such an ill treatment. Even under persecution, the manifesto continues, they would persist in their faith as well as, without any grudges, continue to make supplication to God on behalf of the country and the government.

Along this line of attitude, the manifesto ends with an appeal to the government for true understanding. It requests that the latter recognize the unregistered house churches’ innocent motivation and stop imputing the name of heretics or ‘evil cult’ to their group. It also sincerely calls on the government to implement the policy of religious freedom, without resorting to means of physical violence such as beating, confiscation, detention, fine, or reeducation through labor. For those Christians imprisoned for the sake of preaching the gospel, they ask for earlier release. In conclusion, the manifesto claims that if Christian believers increase, they will bring about wider social stability and higher spiritual civility, and this is the blessing they can contribute to the country.

In contrast to these two manifestos produced from the unregistered house churches that disclose their general theological belief and religious attitude toward the government, a petition expressly for a church or an event deserves our attention. On 10 May 2011, seventeen Protestant church ministers or leaders, all unaffiliated with TSPM, wrote to Wu Bangguo 吳邦國, chairman of the Standing Committee of China’s National People’s Congress, and asked for the citizen’s true religious freedom. In a concerted effort, they spoke for Shouwang Church 守望教會, an unregistered Protestant house church in Beijing which had been barred from worship gathering.

The public letter, titled ‘We Stand for Our Faith: Some Citizens’ Petition to the National People’s Congress with Respect to the Church-State Conflict’, echoes the letter of protest under the same title (women shi weile xinyang 我們是為了信仰) which Wang Mingdao 王明道, one of the spiritual progenitors of the house churches, wrote in 1955 against TSPM as a secularized and politicized organization. In a stout tone, the 2011 letter opens with lines affirming that the undersigned are Chinese citizens who love their country, care about the people’s wellbeing, and obey the government’s administrative authority to secure social order. After this confession of being patriotic, they add in tandem that they are also part of the ecumenical Christian church, revealing themselves as an integral part of world Christianity. Then they describe the Shouwang case by highlighting that the members of this church, over one thousand and coming primarily from the intellectual class, have been forced out of their meeting site. Without a permanent place for worship, they had no choice but to gather outdoors on Sundays. This kind
of mass meeting in the public area has incurred the police’s intervention, with the result of many members’ detention and the church leaders’ house arrest. The petition mentions that the Shouwang Church is by no means an isolated case; similar crackdowns have taken place in many cities across the country. And, as far as the church leaders can see, the cause of the tension lies in the problematic bureaucracy of religious management.

The petition refers to three sources of constitutional or human-rights documents, all of which pertain to religious freedom, to buttress their struggle: Article 36 of PRC’s Constitution, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Of the last two, PRC is one of the signatories. In particular, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is purposefully cited:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest this religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.19

On the basis of this conviction, Christians in most nations of the world, the petition continues to argue, enjoy religious freedom that includes the right to worship, meeting, speech, education, and evangelism.

The petition protests that Protestants in China, unless they join TSPM which is politically manipulated, have been deprived of their religious freedom; restrictions and suppressions by many of the government’s supervisory departments are widely seen. To rectify the abuses, the church leaders request that a special investigation committee be formed to probe into the Shouwang case and urge Beijing City Government to settle it, review whether or not SARA’s ‘Regulations of Religious Affairs’ is unconstitutional, and draft a ‘Protection Law for PRC’s Religious Freedom’.

Toward the end, the church leaders argue that religious freedom is a universal value in the world community. It is the foundation upon which other kinds of human rights, such as the political right and the property right, are built. Without it, a multiethnic country with plural religions is not able to generate a civil society or bring about social stability and national unity and prosperity. The petitioners hope that by way of forming a special committee, the government could adhere to the principle of ruling by the law and serving the people and henceforth initiate a new phase of

productive church-state relation. To conclude their petition, they claim that, as Christians and patriotic citizens, they will continuously pray for their compatriots and the government as well; they will ask God to bestow peace, harmony, and stability upon China that is presently rising and, at the same time, to fill Chinese society with righteousness, benevolence, and tolerance.

A group of ministers and elders of the Early Rain Reformed Church 秋雨之福教會 in Chengdu, headed by Wang Yi 王怡, formulated a theological statement, titled ‘Reiteration of Our House Church’s Position’ and parenthetically called Ninety-Five Theses, on 18 August, to defend their faith.20 Apparently modeling their apologetic writing on Martin Luther’s namesake, they in this piece of literature expound their political theology with numerous biblical quotes but in a systematic and concise way. In the preamble, they express their wish to unite themselves with Christians who share their viewpoints and to launch dialogue with governments of all levels. They outline their theses in six thematic sections, capping each of them with a subtitle that summarizes the central meaning of that particular section.

Theses 1-17 of the Ninety-Five Theses lay out the theological presupposition that asserts God’s supreme sovereignty on the one hand and, on the other, relate it to Chinese people and Chinese government. They state that as God is the creator of all, Chinese territory, history, and cultural products are necessarily part of God’s creation. And since God creates human beings according to his image, every Chinese, along with other peoples, are descendants of Adam; hence equal human dignity and value between the Chinese and other races. Based upon this understanding, no one is allowed to enslave or oppress others, and unless God permits, no one is allowed to rule over others. In Chinese society, all types of authority come from God the ultimate source, and submission to the official authority is justified only with respect to this recognition. Those in power, then, are accountable to God for their political, judicial, or moral decisions. As an innate, universal faculty, human conscience serves as the seat of judgment that dictates our conduct in society. People, the rulers and the ruled alike, have to obey their conscience, which equally means that they have to obey God. Because conscience may vary according to different individuals, the Bible in this connection is the criterion that checks people’s quality of conscience and, concomitantly, their deeds. Government officials who exercise their power in contradiction to the biblical principles while asking the people to obey therefore ruin human conscience and challenge God’s sovereignty. And

20 The Chinese original of this text can be obtained at www.cclifefl.org/View/Article/4248, last accessed 25 February 2016.
people who submit themselves to rules or commands that are unbiblical simply betray their conscience and live an enslaved life inimical to God.

The second section, from Thesis 18 to Thesis 31, is an exposition of the authors’ soteriology and Christology. The Theses argue that as God intervened in the Israelites’ history to save them from slavery in the past, he would do the same whenever and wherever he deems necessary. Jesus the Messiah comes to save humanity who are enslaved in sins. Chinese, past and present, are also sinners, and none of them can save himself or herself. It is God’s will to save all, Chinese included. This saving grace, the core of the gospel, purports the presence of the Kingdom of God to which all nations, rulers, and peoples, China and its inhabitants included, are supposed to turn.

Theses 32-39, the third section, assert that although God’s bestowal of human conscience and his saving grace are universal, Chinese culture, with its emphasis on benevolence and righteousness as the ultimate virtue, does not provide the way to salvation. Instead, Chinese people have for long lived in idolatry, worshipped the emperor and his autocratic institution, and relied upon one’s power for self-perfection. These wrongdoings are unmistakable components of the sins that other peoples have similarly committed and the Bible severely castigates. In this sense, anyone who advocates or seeks for sinicization of Christianity with the purpose to alter the Bible’s fundamental teachings denies Jesus Christ; as such he or she is anti-Christ and will fall under God’s judgment. The sinicization of Christianity includes proclaiming that Chinese culture contains the revelation of the one true God, that there are special Chinese ways to salvation unspecified in the Bible, and that the ecumenical Christian doctrines should be adapted to Chinese social and political realities. The church may have to respect Chinese culture and people in terms of practicing the truth and preaching the gospel, but it stands against distorting the gospel through culture and binding faith with political means, both under the pretext of sinicization of Christianity.

Theses 40-44, the fourth section, deal with ecclesiology. They opine that Christ redeems people across the world, including Chinese, through his blood to form a church. As this resurrected Christ has gained the power to rule over the whole world, all that exist, China and its government included, are subject to his dominion. This means that no matter how many Chinese Christians there are and whatever polity the Chinese government may adopt, Christ reigns supreme; it is not the earthly kings, political parties, cultures, and wealth that control history or the human heart. Therefore the church of Christ may be situated in any place, but it does not belong to any country; it may be regarded as a worldly organization, but it pays its loyalty only to Christ.
On the basis of this interpretation, the fifth section, Theses 45-72, proceeds to elaborate the theology of two kingdoms. These Theses claim that the ‘city of God’ and ‘the city of earth’, one spiritual and the other worldly, are two kingdoms qualitatively different from each other. Christ’s kingdom is superior to the earthly kingdom, although before the Last Judgment, Christ does not materialize his dominion by physical means. Rather, he tolerates the earthly kingdom with love and magnanimity and allows it, supported by arms, to temporarily exist. In the Chinese context, when questioned about their attitude toward the Chinese government, Christians would thus answer in three ways. First, the kingdom of God has come to China, which cannot be withstood by swords or other physical means. Since the church is the body of Christ, every persecution of it only empowers it to grow. Second, the church does not belong to any worldly government. It does not resist the present government by force nor does it resort to administrative privileges to influence society. However, when Christians are deprived of civil rights that are their due, they are entitled to defend themselves against the illegal encroachments through legal means. Third, similar to the case that the worldly government has the authority to regulate human society, the church takes it as its mission to preach the gospel and call for assembly of those who listen to God’s words. If any government or organization impedes the church’s evangelical work, this amounts to resisting God. And the church, in this circumstance, has the duty to reproach this sinful act either in private or in public, with the aim to bring the offender to repentance. In sum, the government is not justified to interfere with or discriminate against the church’s activities, such as gathering for worship, sending missionaries to different local areas, and publishing religious works, unless the secular authority exercises its power for the sake of maintaining social order and does it on the principle of universality and equality. The relationship between church and the state is one that is mutually independent. On the part of the Christians, they regard things that belong to God above those that belong to Caesar; based upon their conscience, they would defend this faith even to the point of losing their life.

Theses 73-95, the last section, strongly express the church’s position against TSPM. They point out that this organization, nominally established by and composed of Christians, is supported and controlled by the government. It is a betrayal of one’s faith, the theses sharply accuse, to accept an atheist government’s manipulation of the church’s management. The past history of TSPM shows that this organization has actually launched an anti-Christ movement in close cooperation with the atheist regime. What it has helped to establish, a nationalist church, denies Christ’s sovereignty
that stands above all nations. TSPM, as a matter of fact, is a religious guild and a vicar of the secular political power. What is urgent today for Chinese Christians is to proclaim the true faith, reelect the clergy, and recount the church's property and membership in order to establish a truly independent church. That is, religious affairs are not China's possessions; rather, they belong to Christ and every Christian's conscience. As long as the Chinese government gives up its control of the church's beliefs, personnel, and evangelical activities, the church, in consideration of social order and public benefit, is glad to register as an independent, civil group.

In addition to the preceding manifestos, letter, and theses we analyzed, there are many more apologetic writings that deserve our consideration. For example, He Guanghu 何光滬, eminent professor of Renmin University, wrote an open letter, titled ‘Stop Persecution, Redeem Conscience, Reduce Conflict, Establish Harmony’, to former President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, and other PRC leaders and spoke for the oppressed Shouwang Church and other Christians of similar fate (9 April 2011). Over one hundred leaders of the unregistered Chinese house churches attended the rally of the Lausanne Movement held in Seoul (25-28 June 2013). They collectively signed the Seoul Commitment in which they, as part of the ecumenical evangelical movement, promised to preach the gospel all over China. A church-minister couple publicized a petition for the Christians arrested in Liuzhou, Guangxi, in which they protested against the local government's power abuse and insisted upon reclaiming their civil right to religious freedom (18 February 2014). Mother of Zhang Kai, renowned Protestant human-rights lawyer, publicly appealed to President Xi Jinping for her detained son, asking for objective investigation of the case and abiding by the law on the part of the government (15 October 2015). In all, these writings, explicitly or implicitly, touch upon the religious ideology, law, policy, and regulations of the party-state on the one hand, and upon the church’s responses to them on the other. In particular, they reveal how Chinese Protestants define themselves by spelling out their fundamental beliefs. Confronting the secular authority, they make clear their boundary

21 The Chinese original of this text can be obtained at www.chinaaid.net/2011/04/blog-post_9.html, last accessed 26 February 2016.
23 The Chinese original if this text can be obtained at www.chinaaid.net/2014/02/218.html, last accessed 2 March 2016.
24 The Chinese original of this text can be obtained at http://xgmyd.com/archives/22088, last accessed 2 March 2016.
that enables us to see where their tension against the party-state lies. In the following pages, I will expound this tension and highlight ideological insistencies on both sides that make their relationship intractable.

**Comparative discussion and critique**

The CCP adheres to Marxist atheism and, as such, approaches religion with a presupposition that implicitly or explicitly negates its legitimacy. Article 36 of PRC’s *Constitution* ensures that ‘citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief’ and, it immediately adds, that ‘No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion’. This article candidly divides people into two kinds, religious believers and non-believers, and bestows upon them an equal right to repudiate each other’s claim. Respect for or protection of religious freedom in the Chinese context, therefore, takes on overtones of a dialectic relationship; it protects people’s right to religious freedom, but it also puts this freedom in a hazardous position that it may be readily challenged. What was originally a positive constitutional support for the religious groups thus becomes an excuse for the party-state to scheme against its realization, as it also becomes the same source for the non-believers to guarantee their anti-religious position. Document 19 and Document 6, as we have shown, elaborate Article 36 with an eye to favoring the party-state’s ideological preference on the one hand and, on the other, reducing religious believers’ freedom to a minimum extent. The 48 articles of the 2005 RRA concretize CCP’s interpretation of religion, further setting up restrictions of various aspects on the religious groups’ activities. These steps of linkage, from the ideological or theoretical to the practical, are programmatic in design. They are constructed by a party-state who is ‘a circumspect and shrewd monopolist as far as organization and ideology are concerned’, although nominally they are meant to help establish a socialist harmonious society.

The CCP’s approach to religion is fundamentally different from that adopted by the unregistered Protestant house churches, and this difference catalyzed the latter’s antagonistic reactions as we have witnessed in

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their apologetic writings. One can detect at least three aspects in CCP’s understanding of religion and implementation of religious policy, and they are closely interrelated. First, CCP is not interested in what religion means to the religious believers but, instead, in what it can achieve for its goal to accomplish national unity and social stability. This functionalist stance, in contrast to the substantivist one, as William E. Arnal’s insightful classification of approaches to religion suggests, treats religion as a means to an end.27 Quite a few scholars have pointed out this feature of CCP’s instrumental rationality when analyzing China’s religious policy in the post-Mao era.28 Second, CCP recognizes only five institutional religions, while relegating the ‘diffused religion’, in which most Chinese’ life is embedded, to the negligible background.29 This ‘purist’ cognition, on the one hand, discriminates against popular culture that may involve or mix with ‘religion’, treating it as non-religion or, worse, ‘superstition’. On the other hand, it excludes sectarian groups that may have a long history of transmission and new religious movements that may grow into mature organizational forms. Narrowing religion down to a limited boundary is thus easier to define and more expedient to control. That CCP supports TSPM and demands all the Christian churches to register with it for official recognition is the corollary of this position. However, whether or not one can define religion without taking cultural, historical, and social contexts into consideration is subject to serious inquiry.30 Third, on the level of administrative management, CCP strategically devises the rule of ‘three-fixeds’ and ask the Christian churches to observe it. This rule is obviously meant to restrict the expansion of the church. More than that, it is set up to bar different local churches from organizing themselves into a united whole, which may pose as a competitor to or a formidable rival against the secular regime. In this connection, CCP’s advocacy of the separation of church and state is also called into question. With regard to this policy, what CCP intends is to keep religion from interfering with secular affairs so that its domain of influence would not be impinged upon. But now it presents itself as a ‘state religion’ which collapses the sacred and the secular or church and state and, consequently, creates more and graver conflicts with the defiant Protestant communities.31

27 Arnal (2000).
28 Fällman (2010); Lai (2006); Leung (2005); Storch (2011).
30 Asad (1993); Geertz (1973).
By contrast, the unregistered Protestant house churches base their faith upon the Bible, the ultimate source of reference. As they believe that it is divinely inspired, it is totally credible and trustworthy. And because it is revealed to the whole of humanity, the central messages it conveys such as the supreme authority of God, death and resurrection of Christ, powerful movement of the holy spirit, Jesus' second coming, salvation through God's grace, love toward God and human fellows, etc., are applicable to peoples all over the world. This fundamentalist faith urges them to be Christian according to the dictate of their conscience. Against the conventional understanding that since religion belongs to the private area and so therein should one's conscience exercise itself, the unregistered Chinese Protestants extend their conscience to the public sphere where they confront the secular authority.\(^{32}\) Thus their approach to religion is substantivist in nature, with an emphasis on relating one's innate true self to what one says and behaves, in private as well as in public. This reflexive and internalist feature stands in opposition to CCP's externalist religious outlook.

The unregistered Protestant house churches repeatedly express that they are good citizens. In their apologetic writings, they never forget to mention that they love the country, care about the people, espouse national and ethnic unity, and are very willing to contribute their efforts to the advancement of society. Indeed the Christian virtues they promote are compatible with the socialist morality which CCP would like to see practiced in Chinese society.\(^{33}\) Rarely have accusations occurred with reference to Chinese Christians’ moral corruptions or offenses against public moral tastes, in contrast to their counterparts in the early centuries of the Roman Empire who were, besides being ‘atheists’, reportedly perpetrators of incest and cannibalism.\(^{34}\) Scholars who have researched different Christian communities in various places of China agreed that Christians in general place high emphasis on moral integrity and have played a significant role in helping to construct a civil society.\(^{35}\) However, this moral or ethical confession, coming sincerely from their conscience, seems unsatisfactory both to themselves and to the party-state. To the unregistered Protestants, if they are content with being called good citizens, their choice to stay away from TSPM would not make sense because the latter exactly takes

\(^{32}\) Duara (2008, p. 44).


\(^{34}\) Ehrman (1999, pp. 54-93); de Ste. Croix (2006, pp. 105-152).

\(^{35}\) Cao (2011); Tong (2013); Wielander (2009).
this feature as its utmost concern. On the part of CCP, it does not want to let go of the unregistered house churches simply because they are morally good. To the party-state, morality is only auxiliary to behavioral conformity circumscribed by rules and regulations, and transgression of them easily brings one's morality into suspicion; it prefers politically good citizens to morally good citizens.

The CCP’s definition of religion is intertwined with its insistence on Chinese nationalism. The unregistered Protestant house churches, although claiming that they are patriotic, find this nationalism narrow and restrictive. Many of the apologetic writings assert that as Christ is the Lord of all human races, those who are called by him are naturally fellow members of the same spiritual family. Signatories of the Seoul Commitment, for example, joined the ecumenical Protestant Christianity in defiance of CCP and TSPM and avowedly committed themselves to world evangelism. What the party-state is sensitive about foremost is, through this type of connection, infiltration by foreign power that may result in Western domination, a historical and national nightmare that it has endeavored for decades to terminate. But the unregistered Protestants see the foreign connection as a fulfillment of the biblical teaching and as part and parcel of their faith. To them, Christianity should be one and undivided; to modify it with any national or racial adjectives contradict their self-understanding.

At this point, one sees a crucial cause underlying the tension between the unregistered house churches and the party-state. The defiant Chinese Protestants intend to affiliate themselves with or incorporate their churches into the world Christianity. They henceforth oppose TSPM which, at the behest of CCP, separates Chinese Protestants from this spiritual tie in the name of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation. To them, TSPM then is secular in nature and political in practice; its nationalist but separatist vision is unacceptable. And to register with this organization and obey its leadership simply violates against the genuine Christian faith. Further, the unregistered house churches stand against the movement of sinicization of Christianity, regarding it similarly as an act of breaching the ecumenical Christian community. On the contrary, they assemble full enthusiasm to Christianize China, its people, culture, and society included. This is not a betrayal of their Chinese citizenship, according to them. Rather, it is a patriotic act because by Christianizing China, this country and its people are to be redeemed out of their present moral and political predicaments.

If they are requested to love their country more, they would bring forth a nationalism of this sort to fulfill their religious belief.

As mentioned, CCP finds it expedient to maintain the principle of one-way ‘separation of church and state’ (zhengjiao fenli 政教分離) in order to keep religious groups from meddling in the secular affairs. The unregistered house churches, however, find this principle detrimental to their existence because the party-state often utilizes it as a pretext to control their development. If they subscribe to this separation principle, they would have to withdraw from many secular engagements. One is reminded that the party-state has the power to circumscribe the secular domain, just as it is up to it to define what religion is. In lieu of this principle, the unregistered church leaders in the Ninety-Five Theses counter with that of ‘mutual autonomy of church and state’ (zhengjiao fenli 政教分立), emphasizing two distinct domains that stand separated from but equal to each other. The keywords, ‘autonomy’, ‘separation’, and ‘equality’, are indicative; combined together, they allow us to understand more deeply the unregistered Protestant house churches’ true intention as well as the goal of their struggle. It is significant to note that the two camps have come to a new confrontational stalemate. Here one sees that CCP starts with political interest and proceeds to take up the religious as its sphere of control. By contrast, the unregistered Protestant house churches, motivated by spiritual zeal, establish their religious domain and expand it to cover the secular territory. The demarcation between the sacred and the secular or church and the state becomes blurred through their mutual interactions, yet, paradoxically, it also becomes more distinct whenever conflicts occur.

Based upon the preceding exposition, it is apt to coin ‘religious nationalism’ as a useful interpretive term for the tension between CCP and the unregistered Protestant house churches. Scholars have argued that such key concepts as religion, modernity, and the nation have entered into the public discourse in China since the early stages of the twentieth century and still remained important points of disputation. Our examination of this tension issue has shown that for CCP, religion should serve the nation. For the interest of the party-state, all religious groups, TSPM and unregistered Protestant house churches included, are supposed to follow the guidelines promulgated through successive official documents. PRC’s constitution guarantees religious freedom to its citizens, but this can be

37 ‘Separation’ (lí) and ‘independence’ (lí) are pronounced in different tonal accents in Mandarin Chinese, although when transcribed into Romanization, they appear the same.
38 Ashwa and Wank (2009); Dunch (2008).
realized only on the condition of the latter’s being submissively patriotic. Religion in this sense is subsumed under the nation, and thus ‘religious nationalism’ here puts its emphasis on ‘nationalism’. For the unregistered Protestant house churches, the nation should not reign above religion. Their Christian religiosity consists of fundamentalist faith and ecumenical spirit, and this serves as the basis upon which they perceive the world and conduct their activities. They assure the party-state that they are patriotic, but this patriotism is a derivative of their religious faith. They would follow the government’s religious policy and observe its rules and regulations so long as they do not contradict their biblical teachings and Christian conscience; to them, religion precedes the nation. ‘Religious nationalism’ here, then, should lay its emphasis on ‘religious’. Whichever aspect both sides of the tension may stress, ‘religious nationalism’ cogently leads us to frame the issue. More importantly, it challenges us to rethink the thorny question of the nature of religion and the ideology that lies beneath and, as well, hover over the church-state tension.

Conclusion

Karrie J. Koesel in her recent study of the relationship between religion and authoritarian states, China and Russia in particular, observed that, based upon each side’s interests, religious groups and the state have begun to develop cooperative partnerships. As she put it:

> Across the authoritarian world, a dynamic process of exchange is at play such that innovative government officials and active religious leaders negotiate the rules that govern their relationship. Conflict can certainly emerge from this interaction, but there is also ample room for cooperation.\(^{39}\)

This general trend impressed her to propose an ‘interests-based theory’ that, in place of the old ‘domination-resistance’ model, emphasizes negotiation and mutual benefiting.\(^{40}\) In China’s case, her thesis could invite echoes from quite a few scholars.\(^{41}\) While the converging tendency through negotiation and mutual engagement might have taken place in many parts of China,

\(^{39}\) Koesel (2014, p. 4).
\(^{40}\) Koesel (2014, p. 5).
\(^{41}\) Kindopp (2004); Liu (2010); F. Yang (2006); Wielander (2009).
one has to be careful about making too quick a conclusion. My examination of CCP’s documents on religion and the unregistered Protestant house churches’ apologetic writings is a good case that supports a more reserved appraisal. SARA’s publication of the ‘Draft for Revision of Regulations on Religious Affairs’ on 7 September 2016, further confirmed my position.42 This new official document, although soliciting feedbacks from the public, is intended to manage and control religious groups and their activities even down to the minute levels. That broader chaos and fiercer conflicts between the Protestant community and the party-state would occur seems foreseeable.43

It is true that local governments may negotiate with the Christians for the sake of better management or for maintaining a ‘harmonious society’. But compromise on the local and bureaucratic level should not be interpreted as the government’s change of religious policy and its regulations. The fundamental interest of CCP is rooted in its ideological belief and inscribed in PRC’s constitution. Challenge of this core interest is often met with suppression.

The unregistered Protestant house churches which we discussed in this chapter represent a substantial portion of Christian population in present-day China. They may come from the rural areas in northern China or from the metropolitan Beijing, yet they share some common features among themselves. Most salient of all is that they all stick to the Bible as the ultimate source of inspiration, espouse an ecumenical Christianity, and harbor an aggressive evangelical spirit. This fundamentalist theology easily clashes with the party-state’s ideology, as both of them appear to insist upon their respective ‘interests’. Suppression of the unflinching Christians only erupts into more reactions and consolidates them into a firmer group. Historians of Christianity who study the phenomenon of persecution and martyrdom have already demonstrated ample precedents in the early history of this religion.44

The observation that Christians have enjoyed more or less religious freedom in post-Mao China is generally correct, but, as my chapter has argued, this should not be taken as something stable. The repressive measures Xi
Jinping launched against the Protestant churches, registered or not, reveal what CCP would do when its real interests are challenged. On the other hand, some scholars have noted a few Chinese Protestant intellectuals who either publicly defended the persecuted fellow Christians or engaged in helping establish a civil society.\textsuperscript{45} Based upon these contributions, they thus hoped for the emergence of a ‘democratic China’.\textsuperscript{46} This expectation is unrealistic because the grip Xi Jinping’s government has recently laid upon Chinese society does not allow this kind of development to happen, at least, so far. Moreover, whether or not church leaders like those who composed the Ninety-Five Theses could create a democracy similar to that in the West is subject to serious doubt. For one thing, their exclusivist Protestant stance conflicts with the phenomenon of religious pluralism that has existed in Chinese society for thousands of years, and the staunch attempt to Christianize China easily turns ‘a harmonious socialist society’ into rifts and disunity. At present and at most, what one can conclude is that the relationship between Protestants and the party-state in contemporary China is maintained along the line of ‘an uneasy equilibrium’.\textsuperscript{47}

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\textsuperscript{45} Fällman (2013); Wielander (2009); Dunch (2008).

\textsuperscript{46} Wielander (2009, p. 863).

\textsuperscript{47} Dunch (2008, p. 178).


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**About the author**

Tsai, Yen-zen. Professor of Comparative Religions, Graduate Institute of Religious Studies, National Chengchi University, Taiwan.

Email: yztsai@nccu.edu.tw