

# Home grown: Church and state in China

by [K. K. Yeo](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

In antiquity China acquired a beautiful name, *Shen-zhou*, which literally means “state of God.” Unfortunately, the title probably was used as a political term meaning that God had given the elite the divine right to rule rather than that Yahweh claimed China as the chosen land and the Chinese as a chosen people. From its seventh-century beginnings, Chinese Christianity has never been able to detach itself from its political context.

The current state of indigenous Chinese Christianity is shaped largely by very recent developments, including the dark days of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when churches were closed by the government. It comes as something of a surprise, then, that in the past two and a half decades the number of Chinese Christians has grown from an estimated 1-2 million in 1979 to between 21 and 80 million, and the number of converts continues to increase staggeringly.

Over the past ten years I have made a number of trips to China, and I have been amazed at the religious and political freedom I have seen there. Still, China is ruled not by law but by people, and the degree of liberty varies from place to place. While religious freedom is guaranteed in the constitution, whether that guarantee is recognized depends on who is interpreting the law. The communist government still has absolute power to come up with new policies, and sometimes it restricts religious activities.

We can see the sociopolitical realities of Chinese Christianity by considering three enterprises: the Three-Self churches, the independent churches, and the institutes of Christian research.

**Three Self and the China Christian Council.** In the years following World War II, Western powers dominated China in critical ways. After the communists came to power in 1949, Christian leader Wu Yao-tsung and the premier, Chou En-lai, prepared the Christian Manifesto, which called Chinese Christians to heighten their

“vigilance against imperialism, to make known the clear political stand of Christians in New China, to hasten the building of a Chinese church whose affairs are managed by the Chinese themselves.” It stated further that Christians should support the “common political platform under the leadership of the government.” To this end, the government worked with Protestant leaders to establish the Three-Self (self-government, self-propagation, self-support) Patriotic Movement.

Now the TSPM, together with the China Christian Council, formed in the early 1980s, serves as official overseer of Protestant churches. (Catholic churches operate under the Catholic Patriotic Association. The government has prohibited Chinese Catholics from maintaining official ties with the Vatican.)

There are about 45,000 such Protestant churches in China, plus 200 “meeting points,” places where Chinese Christians may gather, such as church buildings, homes, offices or universities. The meeting points are divided into two groups: those with 20 to 40 members and those with more than 40. Any gathering of believers with more than 40 people is required by law to register with the government, meaning the government can monitor and maintain social control of such gatherings.

The CCC also partners with the Amity Foundation to advance works of mercy and to oversee the publication and distribution of Bibles. Since the 1980s, Amity Press has printed more than 28 million Bibles. (By law, publications of the CCC are sold in its bookstores or churches, not in public bookstores.) The CCC also seeks to provide Bible translations for eight ethnic-minority groups. The Amity Foundation has a broad goal of “serving society and benefiting the people.” The CCC and Amity conduct work in rural areas, where 60 percent of the people remain illiterate and impoverished. Other objectives of the Amity Foundation include improving health care, contributing to Christian modernization and development through education, better familiarizing Chinese with Christianity, and sharing ecumenical resources among churches.

**Independent churches.** Indigenous Chinese Christianity began primarily in churches founded in the early 20th century by Chinese, without foreign overseers, though some of its founders were educated in or had some contacts with the Christian West. The three main examples of early indigenous Chinese churches are the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family and the Christian Assembly.

The True Jesus Church was founded by Barnabas Tung in 1909 as an outgrowth of revival meetings. The church emphasized evangelism, local church polity, spiritual gifts and communal living. Today, few True Jesus congregations support the TSPM; the majority remain independent.

The Jesus Family was founded by Jing Dianyong, a converted Buddhist, in the village of Mazhaung at Shandong in 1921. The group was popular in northern and interior China. Its communal lifestyle and strict discipline made it very strong; members developed their agricultural skills and often gave a tenth of their harvest to the poor.

The Christian Assembly was founded by Watchman Nee in Fuzhou in 1922. Nee was a prolific author and a charismatic speaker. He preached the message of personal salvation and sanctification, a doctrine he expounded in his book *The Spiritual Man* (1928). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, his group sponsored congregations throughout the world, Taiwan being its strongest foreign base.

Another important indigenous church is the Christian Tabernacle, founded by Wang Ming-dao in Beijing in 1936. He emphasized spiritual regeneration and ultimate trust in God despite suffering and persecution. For two decades, Wang distributed a magazine, *Spiritual Food Quarterly*, to encourage Christians to be faithful to God in a communist land. He refused to join the TSPM.

The Chinese government does not allow unregistered churches to have church buildings. For this reason, many members of these churches congregate in their homes, forming "house churches." Many independent congregations today belong to unnamed churches, rather than to the founding indigenous churches described above. Most of these groups devote time to study of the eschatological and apocalyptic texts, from which they derive strength and faith in the midst of persecution. A high view of Christology also helps them to hold fast to their faith. The worship experiences and preaching of such groups are often charismatic.

The primary distinction in Chinese church life is that between registered and unregistered churches. The government wants all churches to register through the TSPM or the CCC. Many of the independent churches have declined to register, because they believe in the separation of church and state, of theology and politics. And, of course, because the government is officially atheist, they see it as naturally in conflict with religion.

No great theological chasm exists between registered churches and unregistered churches. Many Chinese Christians attend both. I have visited the official seminaries and Bible colleges of the Three-Self movement and have heard sermons preached in churches aligned with Three-Self; their teaching and preaching are as biblical as any lectures and sermons of evangelical seminaries and churches in the U.S. And the great attention to biblical studies in the unregistered churches does not necessarily indicate high orthodoxy. There are many heresies and superstitions in these churches, especially in rural areas—and it is in these locations that Chinese Christianity is growing by leaps and bounds.

However, there is a difference between registered and unregistered churches in political attitude. Most of the churches aligned with the TSPM and the CCC adhere to the theology of Romans 13:1, 4 (“let every person be subject to the governing authorities . . . [they are] God’s servant for your good”) and 1 Peter 2:13 (“For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution”). They hope to be God’s agent of salvation within the political reality. In response to the communist view of religion—and the TSPM has no illusions about communism’s atheist views—the TSPM has been accommodating, finding ways to cooperate with the state’s mission.

The political attitude of the unregistered churches reflects the theology of the Book of Revelation. They assume that the Chinese government, being communist in ideology, is pagan and satanic—similar to that of the Roman Empire, the beast and the dragon in Revelation. Most unregistered churches do not believe that Christianity should collaborate with a government that does not love or honor God. By and large, they don’t find the communist government a trustworthy partner or think that the state’s fallenness is redeemable. Many unregistered churches attempt to focus on theology and to be detached from politics.

**Academic study of Christianity.** Outside the church and seminary, there is much academic interest in Christianity as the core of Western civilization. Surprisingly, the Chinese government has provided some funding to this research, which is being conducted mainly by scholars based at institutions dedicated to the humanities and social sciences (such as the People’s University in Beijing, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, Fudan University in Shanghai, Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou). The government believes that academic research on religions as philosophies or as cultural phenomena will benefit the modernization of China.

With the aid of government resources, many of these researchers are producing work that in quantity and quality exceeds that being done by Christian theologians in seminaries. Their work encompasses biblical studies, doctrine, history, aesthetics, theology and philosophy. Most of these scholars do not explicitly claim to be Christian, although some do. Some refer to themselves as cultural Christians, meaning that they became Christian not through the church (and therefore they will not necessarily be baptized or join a church) but through reading Western literature or studying theology. They study Christianity less as a theological discipline for the faith than as a cultural phenomenon and an academic discipline.

Perhaps the unpredictable nature of the Chinese government makes it necessary for these scholars to hide their faith identities. I recall that my lecture titles in Chinese universities were often changed from “theology” to “Christian thought” or “Christian philosophy.” Still, at a recent conference on Chinese Christian theology, I noticed that a group of young lecturers from major Chinese universities all professed to be Christians. Additionally, all of them were affiliated with churches—whether registered or unregistered. These young professors perceive Christianity as the impetus for the greatness of Western science, politics, economy and freedom. They are convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the salvation of the Chinese and of China.