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Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State

David C. SCHAK

Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the Chinese state and Protestantism. It demonstrates that it varies widely from place to place; moreover, the actual relationship between individual churches and the local authorities that are supposed to govern them paints a quite different picture from that implied by the laws and regulations. The paper also argues that the state faces a dilemma: On one hand it feels threatened by the appearance of autonomous organizations such as unregistered churches, while on the other it values the contributions they make to society and recognizes that subjecting them to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council would require a good deal of force and be very socially disruptive.

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Keywords: China, Protestants, unregistered churches, Three-Self Patriotic Movement, persecution

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Introduction

The Chinese government faces a dilemma. At an ideological level, it is committed to atheism and to the belief that religion will disappear. In the 1950s it established the Religious Affairs Bureau (later rechristened the “State Administration for Religious Affairs”) with a body for each of the five recognized religions to regulate and control religious activities. For Protestantism, this was the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches in China (TSPM, 中国基督教三自爱国运动, *Zhongguo jidujiao san zi aiguo yundong*), established in 1954. About three-quarters of the Protestant churches registered, leaving a minority unregistered (Hunter and Chan 1993: 134). However, the TSPM’s attempts to manage religion in the 1950s and to suppress it entirely during the Cultural Revolution period did not achieve the desired results. Protestants, and to a lesser extent Catholics, actually increased in number during this period; moreover, the increase was underground, with people worshiping in families, with neighbours, attracting victims of Maoism, and being assisted by overseas Chinese (Lee 2007: 287–289).

With this in mind, and realizing that suppression would be disruptive both socially and of efforts to develop the economy, the post-Gang of Four leadership changed tack beginning in 1979. It revived the Religious Affairs Bureau, shut down during the Cultural Revolution, re-opened the state-approved churches, and declared that religion would not only not fade away quickly but would continue to exist as long as classes did. By opening up, the state hoped that religious groups would surface where they could be brought under bureaucratic control and thence be guided to a form of theology and practice in line with party ideology and state development goals.

However, this more congenial *modus vivendi* has also been less than successful. The government, while recognizing the potential contributions religious groups can make to constructing a harmonious socialist society (Fällman 2008: 965–967), has brought in sets of regulations to control it. Document 19 contains the “three designates”: It

restricts religious activities to approved locations, requires that they be conducted by approved clergy [i.e. those trained in government-established seminaries], and limits their scope to the geographic sphere in which a given member of the clergy is permitted to practise (Fulton 2009).

The thrust of these regulations would limit increases in Protestant believers

by rendering itinerant evangelism illegal, severely restricting the number of leaders qualified to serve in churches, and effectively placing a cap on the number of churches that can operate in any given city or region (Fulton 2009, see also Xing 2003: 27-28).

In his “theological reconstruction”, Bishop Ding Guangxun, the leading state-sponsored clergyman, revised Protestant theology, stripping it of supernatural content and notion of salvation by faith and converting it to morality and ethics.

Despite this, Protestantism has grown rapidly in China. From an estimated 1 million registered church members in the early 1950s, the number reached 3 million in 1986, 4.5 million in 1988, and 17 million in 2003 (Dunch 2008: 169). Present estimates of Protestant numbers range from 25 million to 130 million (CASS 2010; Yu 2009: 51). Cao gives a more reliable figure of 60 million, only 20 per cent of whom belong to registered churches (2011: 5). Moreover, many of those who belong to unregistered churches are in such churches because they oppose the official church and strongly resist cooperating with it and with the religious bureaucracy. This has frustrated the government in its efforts to exert control over Protestants and their beliefs. Moreover, the goal of many of these churches is to Christianize and thus change China (Wielander 2009b).

The party-state thus faces a complex dilemma. It has granted religion a positive place in society as a moral force and an ally in development, but it fears it as a social force. The state’s efforts to co-opt and control it have so far achieved less than desired, but for the most part it desists from using more robust tactics because the price of doing so would be too high. I will explicate this dilemma below. I will first explain the differences between the registered and the unregistered churches and their relations with the state and with society. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the state-church relationship is complex and in spite of the existence of a blueprint to control religion, church-state relations are anything but uniform. In many locales, churches – registered and unregistered – do their business with little or no interference from the authorities, but in some areas, the authorities are stricter. I will then examine a number of recent cases in which the authorities have cracked down hard on particular churches and will then attempt, based on the available data, to identify under what circumstances the state regards it necessary

to take such action. I will conclude by discussing how China might handle the dilemma religion causes.

The paper¹ is based on occasional visits to church services and interviews with Protestant church leaders and members, academic researchers and others in Beijing, Wenzhou, Shanghai, and several cities in Jiangsu from September through December 2009 and in July, September and October 2010. In addition, I have consulted secondary materials including academic research, newspapers and websites.

Protestants in China

Like all recognized religions in China, Christianity is administered under a state religion bureau presently called the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA; 国家宗教事务局, *Guojia zongjiao shiwu ju*). The SARA is directly subordinate to the State Council (国务院, *guowuyuan*), the highest government administrative body, and the United Front Department (统战部, *tongzhanbu*), an organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that is responsible for bringing together all the disparate parts of Chinese society. The TSPM is one of the supervisory bodies under the SARA charged with overseeing Christians. In 1980, the SARA formed a second body, the China Christian Council (中国基督教协会, *Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui*), to train future clergy and print Bibles and hymnals. Together these are referred to as the “Two Associations” (两会, *liang hui*).

The TSPM administers those churches that are affiliated with it, but as mentioned, some churches are not. They are colloquially referred to as “house churches” (家庭教会, *jiating jiaohui*) because most are small and members often meet in someone’s home, but this term is problematic in that it primarily refers to meeting for worship in a home rather than a chapel, and especially in rural areas, with chapels far apart, some members of TSPM churches worship in each other’s homes for the sake of convenience. Yang refers to these as “black market” (illegal) churches in contrast to the legal, “red market” TSPM churches (Yang 2006). However, most researchers now use the term “unregistered churches” and refer to TSPM churches as “registered churches”. I will follow that convention.

1 I am grateful to the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange and the Guojia Hanban Banshichu for supporting this research. Thanks also to the three anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

Registered and unregistered churches differ in legality and relations with government; size; social participation; pastoral training; worship style; and orientation. TSPM churches are registered under the SARA, hence they are legal. They are thus free to build chapels, which they do with the government's blessing. For example, according to a brochure containing plans for the construction of a new 20 million CNY chapel for the Liushitang church in Wenzhou, the project was approved by Premier Wen Jiabao, Standing Committee member Li Keqiang and Party Vice-Chairman Xi Jinping. Moreover, 13 of the 16 TSPM chapels in Suzhou are new. Much of the money for these projects is raised from donations, but the government will provide financial assistance if needed. An interviewee stated that one Wenzhou church raised 900,000 CNY in a single day and that this was not unique.

Further government support comes in the form of training future pastors in Two Associations-run seminaries, the primary one being the Jinling Seminary in Nanjing. However, most of these seminaries are small: one Jinling graduate said there were fewer than 30 students in his class, and stated moreover that in the past three years over 100 graduates serving in TSPM churches had left to join house churches, he being one of them. Vala states that many students reject the TSPM's liberal interpretations of theology (2008: 131). Unsurprisingly, there is a shortage of pastors in official churches (Vala 2009: 103). The government also pays TSPM church pastors and other church workers. Salaries are not high, but they are adequate, and given the shortage of employment a job is guaranteed.

The government also exercises control over registered churches. Seminary training is in accordance with government-approved theology and ideology, part of which is the stress on the mutual adaptation of socialism and religion as well as political study "to train young patriotic religious personnel who support socialism and the leadership of the Party" (Cheng 2003: 22). TSPM officials are also supposed to ensure that sermons delivered in recognized churches are in accordance with party proscriptions (Bays 2003: 492); this means, *inter alia*, avoiding taboo subjects such as the Armageddon and the Second Coming, when the governments of the world will be destroyed and the reign of Christ will begin. Making such messages more menacing in the PRC is that millenarian religious rebellions have been a force in the fortunes of regimes since the second century AD, and the suppression of Falungong shows that the

communist party government is well aware of this. However, some pastors say that they are never monitored.

Being legal also means that there are no restrictions on the size of TSPM congregations, and numbers of 1,000 to 2,000 are not uncommon. It also means that TSPM churches can take active roles in society, and many individual churches do indeed carry out philanthropic projects (see below).

Unregistered churches, by contrast, are formally illegal. Moreover, having none of the support that TSPM churches have, they are restricted in other ways. They must find their own venues for worship in someone's home or in rented premises. One Beijing unregistered church, the Shouwang Church, has recently tried to buy premises, but the government has so far blocked this (Liu 2010; Peng 2009). Unregistered churches also receive no support in training their pastoral staff; in fact, doing so is illegal as only government-controlled seminaries are legally allowed to train religious staff. However, there are many "underground" seminaries. According to Aikman, the four major Henan networks alone have over 200, some of which have over 70 students (2003: 128). Rural house churches are at a further disadvantage in that rural educational levels are much lower than those in cities, and most rural pastoral staff have no more than a middle school education. Moreover, their theological training, despite the number of house church seminaries and the efforts of teachers to travel from place to place to give training, is hit or miss. It is now possible to access seminary classes on the Internet, but those in poor rural areas are much less likely to have computers.

Being illegal, most unregistered churches are quite small, some deliberately so to avoid detection, others because 30 is the de facto allowable size by local authorities. This restricts their ability to raise funds for such things as philanthropy, though pastors of some small churches said that they had enough for normal expenses. Despite the disadvantages experienced by unregistered church leaders and parishioners, the number of Christians affiliated with such churches is higher than the number who affiliate with TSPM churches (see Yang 2005: 427).

Another difference is in organization. TSPM churches are based on locality, e.g. people in Beijing go to a Beijing church, though they may be attracted to one outside the district in which they live. Unregistered churches, too, can be local, but in some areas they are also networked; for example, Aikman describes four large unregistered church networks in Henan province (2003: Ch. 3-4). Moreover, in places from which large

numbers of migrant workers originate, those workers will often attend a branch of their home unregistered church, called a “meeting point” (聚会点, *jubui dian*), in the city where they work. A minister in a Jiangsu City said his church had about 1,000 members; around 100 met at his home branch, and the others, migrant workers in other lower Yangzi cities, met where they worked.

One further difference between TSPM and unregistered churches is in religious orientation. There are presently no denominational differences among Protestants in China (Xie 2010). Denominations existed from the beginning of the missionary era in the mid-nineteenth century until the 1950s. These included missionary churches – mostly Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregationalist and Methodist – as well as indigenous ones; most of the latter were inspired by, but rejected, mainstream denominations as foreign-controlled, requiring a highly trained clergy, and hierarchical. Indigenous churches tended to follow a Pentecostal style of organization and worship. Denominations disappeared in 1957, when the government outlawed them and tried to bring all churches under the TSPM. Many of the church leaders who rejected TSPM affiliation were, in fact, from indigenous churches.

Although Dunch has classified Protestants into foreign-led mainstream denominations, indigenous churches that arose from the early twentieth century, and indigenous churches that arose after 1980 (2001: 197), interviewees identified three major divisions in present-day Protestantism: Pentecostals (灵恩派, *ling'enpai*), evangelicals (福音派, *fuyinpai*), and “reform” or new city churches (改革派, *gaigepai* or 城市新兴教会, *chengshi xinxing jiaohui*). They differ in style of worship and orientation toward religion. The largest are the evangelicals, subdivided into conservative, likened to conservative evangelical Christians in the US, and liberal, likened to Billy Graham. Next largest are the Pentecostals. Both of these are predominantly rural, which also means that members and leaders are less educated. Evangelicals are less studied, but one thing known about them is that they take a very literalist view of scripture, though they often interpret it allegorically (Dunch 2001: 204). They also tend to be theologically conservative.

Pentecostal churches are also conservative and are strongly egalitarian. Their religious focus is on the Holy Spirit and on spiritual gifts, a major difference between them and evangelicals. Aside from loud prayer and speaking in tongues during worship, they also engage in spirit singing and dancing, and they believe very strongly in faith healing through

prayer or laying on of hands (Oblau 2005; Hunter and Chan 1993: 199-210). Several observers have likened their form of Christianity to folk religion in its egalitarianism and utilitarianism (Deng 2005; Dunch 2001; Leung 1999). According to Deng, they stress the miraculous and the supernatural, healing and prophecy; their religion is intensely millenarian, giving

its followers both a hope and an assurance in times of uncertainty caused by natural calamities and poverty, political tension, and a sense of meaninglessness of life (Deng 2005: 438).

They are egalitarian, with spiritual gifts and revelation open to all (Deng 2005: 438). Währisch-Oblau sees this kind of religion as the result of rural poverty and the lack of basic services such as health care (1999). Leung also cites their low level of education and the lack of trained clergy to guide them. He notes that this sort of charismatic religion was at its height in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution period but has diminished since then (1999: 23-26).

Religious authorities take a very dim view of such practices. In recognizing the five religions, the Chinese government labelled folk practices, such as some of the practices found in Pentecostal groups, as *mixin* (迷信, “superstition”, which is banned; faith healing, unless accompanied by recognized medical treatment, would fall under this label (Währisch-Oblau 1999: 9). Some rural Pentecostal groups have been designated as “evil cults” (邪教, *xiejiao*), putting them into the company of the Falungong, and are thus banned. One such group is the sect Eastern Lightning (东方闪电, *dongfang shandian*) (Dunn 2009), which several years ago kidnapped rival Christian group leaders and tried to convert them while holding them hostage. Another is a Henan network, the Born Again Church (重生派, *chongshengpai*), also known as the Weepers for their practice of three days of weeping to accompany repentance (Anti-Cult 2009; Aikman 2003: 86-89).

The reform congregations are exclusively urban and well-educated (Yu 2009: 51). They tend toward a more Calvinist theology. In terms of religious orientation, we can classify the evangelicals as conservative and strongly literalist believers, the Pentecostals as folk believers who worship Jesus as a powerful or efficacious (灵, *ling*) deity who can answer prayers and grant requests, and the reformed as ethical Christians for whom the ethical aspects of Christianity – Christian values and leading a Christian life – are shared alongside notions of salvation. The reform approach is probably closer to that of TSPM leaders, whose champion-

ing of Christianity is also for its ethics and values but which plays down faith and the need for belief.

In attitudes toward “works”, especially philanthropy, the reform congregations are strongly supportive, as are TSPM congregations, and both are involved in philanthropic projects (Vala 2008: 178-179, 198-199). Among other congregations, there is less universal support. Some pastors and members are concerned only about faith and conversion and regard engaging in works as “social gospel” (社会福音, *shehui fuyin*), which they associate with liberal interpretations of Christianity and thus reject (cf. Hunter and Chan 1993: 123). Some who do engage in philanthropy demand the prior acceptance of Jesus. The reform approach, by contrast, is to use philanthropy to demonstrate Christianity. If recipients ask about their motivations, they are happy to share the gospel with them, but their philanthropy is not conditional.

There are both TSPM and unregistered congregations that are Pentecostal, reform and evangelical, though the former two are found less often in TSPM churches as the SARA is more suspicious of them. TSPM officials are strongly opposed to the charismatic behaviour of the Pentecostals, regarding many of their practices as superstitions. They feel that the growth of the rural church is too rapid, therefore the membership is of low quality; they also fear the growth of sects, heresy, and social unrest. Two Associations publications make no mention of faith healing except as negative examples. Its concern is partly that rural believers will opt for faith healing exclusively and not consult trained medical staff or take medicines. To counter this, it encourages churches to establish small clinics that prayer can complement (Währisch-Oblau 1999: 8).

As for reform congregations, the Two Associations feel somewhat intimidated by them. Many reform members are intellectuals, lawyers, journalists, publishers, or academics on university faculties or in the China Academy of Social Science. They are the kind of elites that the TSPM and the CCP wants as its own.

Protestantism and Society

In the past five years, the government has manifested a more welcoming attitude toward religion. In Premier Wen Jiabao’s keynote address to the April 2006 World Buddhist Conference in Hangzhou, he expressed hope that Buddhism would help create a harmonious society in China. On 11 October 2006, the 6th Plenum of the Party Congress of the Chinese

Communist Party Central Committee passed the document “Decisions on Some Big Questions Regarding a Harmonious Society” which contained, among other things, a pledge to “develop the capability of religion to actively promote social harmony” (Luo 2008: 162-163). Mentioned among the ways to do this were philanthropy and providing spiritual nourishment to those whose lives have been disrupted by the change to a market economy (Luo 2008: 171).

There is thus no question that by this time, PRC leaders had recognized the usefulness of religion in achieving good governance, something leaders in the 1950s did not. Instead, the earlier leaders tried to restrict religion: They required all religious groups to register under the Religious Affairs Bureau, facilitating government control; the government also monopolized philanthropy, an activity that had been a staple of foreign religious groups since they were allowed to proselytize in China as the result of “unequal treaties” in the nineteenth century. Protestants and Catholics had set up a range of philanthropic institutions such as hospitals and orphanages, but early in the 1950s the PRC government disbanded them. It initially targeted those that received foreign funding and those run by local gentry. The former had too close a connection with foreign powers, and the government regarded the latter as feudal and deemed charity from elites to be “sugar-coated bullets” aimed at fooling the people. On 24 April 1950, Dong Biwu stated that the people and the government would work together “to heal the scars of war” and reorganize society (Wang 2008: 200). This denied the independent status of popular philanthropy and meant a central government takeover and a squeezing out of popular initiatives. By 1954, pre-1949 charity organizations had disappeared, and the government reorganized the hospitals and schools formerly run by religious groups, placing them under the Chinese Red Cross or the Chinese Welfare Foundation (中国福利基金会, *Zhongguo fuli jijin hui*) (Wang 2008: 198-201).

From the 1950s to the 1980s, all welfare functions were assumed by local communities – “five guarantees” households in the rural areas and mutual help associations in the cities, both of which were under government direction (see Hunter and Chan 1993). Initially, fellow villagers or neighbours assisted poor families, and the government handled groups such as opium addicts, prostitutes and beggars. The government regarded philanthropy as something needed only under bourgeois capitalism, and even the term for it, *cishan* (慈善), was dropped because of its association with “bourgeoisie humanism”. According to Wang Junqiu,

people believed that communism would create a material heaven on earth, and admitting a need for philanthropy undermined this. In addition, the government wanted everything under its control. Moreover, because of Mao's campaign style of governance and the "iron rice bowl" of social services provided by the people's communes and the state-owned enterprises, until the 1980s China was able to provide only a minimum living standard that could not increase or create the surplus needed for private philanthropy. Wealth and income were levelled to the extent that there were no rich or better off to help the poor and unfortunate (Wang 2008: 215-218).

The government began to revise this position in 1978. By 1993, it had redefined philanthropy as assistance to others out of sympathy influenced by religious or superstitious beliefs. It still regarded it as a temporary and passive sort of relief that had controversial social results. Moreover, despite "some becoming rich before others" (少数人先富起来, *shaoshu ren xian fu qilai*), because most in China were still poor, China still lacked an economic base for philanthropy. Furthermore, because of the destruction of the philanthropic infrastructure from the 1950s it took some time for philanthropy to revive itself, and that philanthropy which did exist was done by state bodies under official leadership.

The 1980s saw the gradual re-establishment of philanthropic organizations. In 1981 the government established the Chinese Children and Youth Foundation (中国儿童少年基金会, *Zhongguo ertong shaonian jijinhui*) and allowed it to solicit public donations. It was registered as an autonomous nonprofit Organization whose mission was to assist the youth, especially in education, paying special attention to those in poor or minority areas (Wang 2008: 227). This was followed by the creation of a number of state-based charities, including the Amity Foundation, which was a China Christian Council initiative. In the 1990s, as the economy continued to develop, many individuals became wealthier, society became more unequal, and a return of grass-roots philanthropy from small individual donations to private charitable foundations began, stimulated by a major disaster, the 1991 eastern China floods (Wang 2008: 231-232).

Although government/ party organizations still provide most philanthropy, religious groups also participate. Buddhist and Daoist monasteries were actually required to establish either a "merit association" (功德会, *gong de hui*) or a foundation to carry out philanthropic activities. Although some have done so (see Wei 2008: 310-311, 314), Buddhists and Daoists are not known for their charity in China, and their contribu-

tions are small compared to their numbers of adherents and the wealth of their temples. (An exception is the Nan Putuoshan Monastery in Xiamen.) The Catholic Jinde Foundation is very active in the areas of northern China where Catholicism is strong (see Zhang 2008).

The most prominent non-government philanthropic organizations are Protestant. The Amity Foundation is the largest and most well known. It operates throughout China providing assistance in disaster relief, church-run social work and medical education in China's poorest areas, HIV/ AIDS awareness and prevention training, education of rural and migrant worker children, special education (e.g. deaf or disabled children), care for orphans, environmental protection, and village development. Its major focus is alleviating rural poverty.

Aside from Amity, there are four other major Protestant foundations:

- the Holy Love Foundation (圣爱基金会, *sheng ai jijinhui*), founded in 1994 with a focus on providing professional help to disabled or abandoned children and orphans in Sichuan Province;
- the Changjiang Education Foundation (长江平民教育基金会, *Changjiang pingmin jiaoyu jijinhui*), approved in 2002, with a focus on educating children from poor families;
- the China ActionLove Volunteer Association (中国爱心行动义工协会, *Zhongguo aixin xingdong yigong xiehui*), which does disaster relief and provides aid for children; and
- the Zhejiang Huafu Philanthropic Foundation (浙江华福慈善基金会, *Zhejiang hua fu cishan jijinhui*), approved in 2008. It participated in the Sichuan earthquake relief but is still looking for a major focus.

Another important Protestant organization is the YWCA. It began operating in China prior to 1949, was disbanded by the PRC government, and then re-opened after the reforms with a redefined mission. Among other projects, it sponsors many youth activities, especially involving the arts (Zuo 2008: 151-157).

Aside from large foundations and organizations, many TSPM congregations have their own projects, and some members volunteer individually in government hospitals, hospices and orphanages. In addition, they engage in disaster relief, medical treatment, education about AIDS and AIDS sufferers, hygiene and sanitation, assisting autistic children, and providing training and counseling for unemployed workers (Luo 2008: 165-170).

Unregistered churches participate less in philanthropy. Most are small and rural and have limited resources, and they are illegal, which limits their actions. Unregistered church leaders and congregations are also much more likely to reject philanthropy as social gospel. However, some house church pastors and congregations participate enthusiastically. For example, one Shanghai house church assists needy people, the aged and neighbourhood families which have encountered sudden difficulties. It also participates in a Shanghai Welfare Association (上海福利会, *Shanghai fulihui*) project giving toys and sweets to poor children at Christmas and cooperates with an international church by volunteering at orphanages to care for the disabled children. The church also has a project working with drug addicts and another in Yunnan building a church and a school in a remote mountain area. The pastor of this church said that Christians assist others because they believe it is their duty to do so, and that Christians carrying out philanthropy helps Christianity become more accepted by others. Other urban Christians I have spoken with essentially define their Christianity by rendering help to others.

The exact contribution of Protestant or other religious organizations is unknown. First, religious organizations are not a separate category in government statistics (see Yang and Ge 2009). Second, when Christian organizations have volunteered, as many did after the Wenchuan earthquake, their donations were accepted by the local authorities but the identities of the donors were not noted, and persons or organizations that wanted to stay and contribute to the rescue and recovery efforts were told that they could do so as individuals but not as religious organizations. There is resistance to public acknowledgement of religious organizations for their social contributions at the expense of giving credit to the government, the party, and the People's Liberation Army (Xu 2009).

State-Church Relations

In examining the relationship between the state and Protestant churches, TSPM and unregistered churches need to be looked at separately. The state-TSPM relationship is relatively simple: The state both supports and controls the TSPM and its affiliated churches. TSPM churches generally comply with state directives, though there are instances when individual churches do not. One such example can be found in Wenzhou, where

there are over 2,000 churches (Cao 2011: 2) and where the government is least likely to harass them. In Wenzhou, there are several TSPM churches that are under government control and remain loyal to the Two Associations, reportedly because they derive a lot of benefits from doing so. There are also five large TSPM churches that are independent – they are registered with the SARA but they act independently and pay no heed to the Two Associations. (These are referred to as “independent TSPM” (等记独立, *deng ji du li*) churches.) I will deal with other instances below.

The state-unregistered church relationship is much more complex. Although they have generally been left alone since the 2005 promulgation of the new Religious Affairs Regulation, unregistered churches are still formally illegal. The Chinese constitution grants citizens freedom of belief and protects “normal” religious activities (O’Brien 2010: 376), but regulations passed in the 1980s and 1990s still restrict religious practice. Unregistered churches are supposed to register directly with the SARA or attach themselves to a TSPM church, and local officials are supposed to pressure them to register. But unregistered church leaders rarely comply, and officials generally overlook this. However, failing to register does affect their way they operate, as without registration they cannot get a seal or open a bank account as an organization. However, this is not a strong enough sanction to change minds.

While some may have other complaints, unregistered church leaders reject government interference with what they believe is God’s realm. For many, perhaps most, this rejection of government extends to rejecting the Two Associations and even the Amity Foundation. Although there are exceptions, this frequently results in a tense relationship between TSPM and house churches, despite both being Christian. Unregistered-church Christians generally consider the Two Associations and their personnel to be tainted. They regard TSPM interpretations of Christianity as too liberal, overlooking some important aspects such as the Second Coming, lacking in faith, and being of low moral standard (Cheng 2003: 32; Hunter and Chan 1993: 192). They regard some TSPM leaders as insincere, seeing being a TSPM pastor more as an iron rice bowl than a religious calling. There are also residual feelings from the past that TSPM leaders were responsible for some of the persecution that took place in the 1950s (see Lambert 2009).

A third issue is corruption. A graduate of the (TSPM) Jinling seminary said that he became disillusioned with the TSPM and left to work in

a house church because the former's leaders were too close to government, its officer elections were shams, and its leaders lived the high life, getting together with government cadres for banquets costing 1,000 CNY or more. Moreover, they often engaged in gossip and backbiting, for him simply not proper Christian behaviour (cf. Hunter and Chan 193: 193-194, 202-203). Many house church members also regard TSPM churches as creatures of the state which have traded their integrity for government acceptance and good treatment while they see house churches as opposed to the SARA agenda and representing pure Christianity.

A Shanghai house church pastor who retired in his forties to devote himself to God learned firsthand the intensity of these feelings. He had long wanted to work in his community, feeling that doing good for others would lead some to Christianity. Recently, local government officials asked him to establish a community centre. The centre would run educational programmes and provide counseling, and it would be affiliated with the local TSPM. It would operate as a secular organization but could use the premises for religious meetings on Sundays. He enthusiastically accepted the offer and then tried to recruit other house church pastors to join him in the venture. Although well known to them, the others all firmly rejected him, not because they felt that he had sold out or would be compromised but because the centre would be under the TSPM.

Persecution of Unregistered Churches

There are tens of thousands of unregistered churches in China, most of which carry out their business with little if any trouble from the local authorities. However, in a small number of cases, governments have taken sometimes quite severe actions against particular churches resulting in their closure; the destruction of church property; the confiscation (or looting) of church assets or materials; their fragmenting into much smaller congregations; and even the jailing of leadership personnel. Although actions taken are couched in legal justifications, the present relationship between house churches and government is not governed by law but is best described as closer to a metaphorical social contract based on incomplete or unarticulated understandings of what is and is not permissible. This section will detail cases of government action against

churches. It will be followed by an explanation of these actions based on a broader view of governmental treatment of the church sector.

According to the 2009 China Aid Report,² there were some positive events in that year, including a decrease in persecutions in Henan, the release of a Xinjiang pastor without a prison sentence, and the cessation of violence in the persecution of another well-known pastor (China Aid 2010). However, there was an increase of 19 per cent in cases of government persecution of Christians in 2009 compared to 2008, including “disrupting church worship meetings, harshly punishing church leaders, and tightening control of the TSPM Church”. There were known incidents in 17 administrative jurisdictions, including crackdowns on several large and prominent urban house churches as well as two TSPM churches. China Aid says that the number of persecutions has increased in the past five years (Homer 2009: 52). These are presented below.

Shouwang Church, Beijing

Shouwang is a large church. It boasts approximately 1,000 members, many of whom are intellectuals or professionals. It is thus not a typical congregation. Its leaders have tried for several years to legalize its existence and have applied to have it formally registered, but these applications have all been rejected. In 2009, the Beijing authorities put pressure on its landlord to terminate its lease. Shouwang leaders tried to find other venues but were unsuccessful, quite probably also because of government pressure. In late October, its leaders announced that on 1 November they would meet in Haidian Park. However, members arrived for the meeting to find the gates locked and the park closed; a notice on the gate

2 The main source of information on religious persecution comes from China Aid, a Christian group based in Texas and founded by Bob Fu (傅希秋), who, after being jailed following the Tiananmen Square Incident, went to the United States and converted. China Aid receives reports from a number of sources in China about government actions against religious groups, in particular Protestants, and because of these actions it often takes a very strong anti-Chinese government agenda. These actions are not reported in the Chinese media. Occasionally, foreign sources get word of one or another incident, but China Aid is the major source of information about such actions. Information on other websites generally makes reference to China Aid. Its reports may or may not be representative; it states that it hears about only a portion of all cases and, moreover, that its data have an urban bias, probably because those in cities are more likely to report persecutions. Nor do they meet desired standards of objectivity or completeness. However, they are the most complete source of information.

explained the reason was “to facilitate the movement of plants”. Having originally planned to meet inside the park, the group instead worshipped in front of the gate.

They met outdoors again the following Sunday. The authorities tried to prevent this meeting by detaining the minister for several hours, but an assistant minister took his place. With US President Obama about to arrive in Beijing, the authorities negotiated with Shouwang’s leaders and provided the congregation with a TV studio for their worship services. In reaction to the Beijing government’s actions, Shouwang’s leaders put out an appeal for donations to buy a place of their own, and although they made a purchase, a floor in an office building, the authorities have prevented their moving in on the grounds that the venue is unsuitable for its intended purpose. Allowing the church to move in would also, of course, be a step toward *de facto* recognition of Shouwang. So the Shouwang congregation is still meeting in the studio (China Aid, 25 August 2010; Liu 2010).

Liangren Church

The Liangren Church is in Guangzhou’s university district, where it attracts young intellectuals and migrant workers. On the morning of 2 May 2010, the members arrived for worship only to find the doors to their then-premises locked and chained, with guards blocking the entrances, so they met outside instead. The Liangren Church began having problems shortly after the Wenchuan earthquake in May 2008. Some members, including Pastor Wang Dao’s wife, Sun Haiping, had gone to assist, and while there they established the Little Lamb Children’s Home to assist quake victims. Sun was later praised for her work.

From the time of the quake until the beginning of 2010, local authorities detained Pastor Wang on several occasions and harassed members of his congregation, even chasing them out of meetings at times. Problems greatly increased at the beginning of 2010 – the congregation was forced to move premises ten times in the first four months. Each time the church found a new place to meet, the authorities pressured the landlord to evict. The authorities have also repeatedly ordered Pastor Wang Dao to stop holding services, telling him that the worship activities are illegal and that his church must become part of the TSPM movement. He repeatedly refused and has applied for a legal place to meet in order to “abide by God’s commandment of ‘You must not stop gatherings!’” In late November 2010, the church was still operating but

was a good deal smaller. Moreover, kindergartens operated in three provinces by Sun Haiping had been raided on suspicion of providing religious instruction. She was in the United States at the time of the investigations speaking on “democracy and religious freedom” (China Aid, 5 May 2010; Monitor China 2010).

Linfen Church

The Linfen Church actually refers to a network of 30 churches in Shanxi province that are home to some 50,000 worshippers. It was reported to be socially active in the community thus attracting many believers. On 13 September 2009, about 400 persons described as police, officials and “hired thugs” descended on one of the churches in the network, the Fushun Church, which was under construction at the time. The group attacked church members who were sleeping at the construction site – 20 of whom were hospitalized – and ransacked the site, destroying 17 buildings and looting property that was inside. Authorities also moved to prevent worship elsewhere in the network, stationing police at other sites. A week later, fearing the potential reaction from the parishioners, the Fushun County government agreed to pay 1.4 million CNY in compensation and allowed the church to be rebuilt, but the bans on worshiping at other locations were maintained. However, Linfen leaders refused the compensation.

Subsequent to their initial action, authorities arrested five leaders and charged them with illegally occupying agricultural land (the church had applied to the local Religious Affairs and Land Bureaus but received no reply) and disrupting traffic (member traffic to and from churches). The leaders were tried two months later with little attorney-client access or attorney access to the documents to be used by the prosecution. The trial lasted from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and the accused were given sentences of 3½ to 7 years.

Wanbang Missionary Church

Shanghai’s Wanbang Church, aka the “All-Nations Church”, had a membership numbering 1,200. It was banned by the authorities on 2 November 2009, when 30 police officers as well as officials from the SARA and four other government departments entered the church, isolated its minister, Cui Quan, an ethnic Korean, from others, and proceeded to interrogate him on charges that Wanbang was an “illegal

church” conducting an “illegal assembly”. The authorities ordered that it cease operating immediately. At the same time, authorities in other Shanghai precincts questioned others in the church leadership and forbade them from going to the church. Some reports state that all members and even one-time attendees of the Wanbang Church were interrogated. The result has been the breakup of the Wanbang congregation into small groups, losing some worshipers along the way (Wang 2009).

The Wanbang Church had been very influential, and it had a fairly extensive philanthropy programme, rendering assistance to victims of the Wenchuan earthquake, donating money to a fund for Hui minority people in a drive organized by a local Xinjiang government, sending gift packages through a government conduit to young people whose parents are divorced and whose families are financially strapped, extending hospice care to terminal patients, and financing surgery to burn victims otherwise unable to afford it (China Aid, 7 November 2009).

This action was not without warning; according to both Radio Free Asia and a piece by Liu Sutong published in the Christian Forum, the Shanghai authorities had been planning to ban Wanbang since the beginning of the year. On 10 February, six officials visited Reverend Cui and ordered him to cancel the imminent meeting of the Urban House Church Pastors Fellowship. Reverend Cui argued that the citizens had the right to worship, but the authorities said that if he did not call off the meeting they would use more forceful tactics. The meeting went ahead at a different venue on 12 February, but soon afterward Reverend Cui discovered that the authorities had pressured Wanbang’s landlord to terminate its lease within 30 days (*Gospel Herald* 2009).

Other Cases

- Police in Beijing stopped a baptismal service underway in a local waterway by an unregistered Beijing church (China Aid, 25 August 2009).
- Han Changxu, pastor of the Immanuel Church in Tianjin, was banned from his ministry. Authorities had seen Pastor Han, an ethnic Korean, having contact with missionaries from South Korea at the time of the Olympics, after which they put him under surveillance. In March 2009, a South Korean Christian attended a Sunday service at Immanuel Church, prompting the police to arrest Pastor Han. The local authorities then declared the church and an affiliated

nursing home to be “illegal structures” and on 27 June 2009 demolished the church (China Aid, 6 August 2009).

- Changchunli Church in Jinan, Shandong, is a TSPM church. Authorities began harassing members in June 2009, and on 14 June more than 100 police officers forced the congregation out of the church and occupied the buildings. When they left, hundreds of Christians moved into the church building to guard it day and night, erecting tents on the grounds. They continued to guard the church until 23 November 2010, when over 200 people dressed in police uniforms, wearing police helmets, and claiming to be police officers suddenly stormed the tents and occupied the site. From the information provided, the conflict is over property. The director and deputy director of the Jinan Municipal Bureau for Ethnic and Religious Affairs wanted to seize the land and demolish the church buildings. The director allegedly bribed the demolition and removal officials and manipulated the presidents of the Jinan Two Associations, who signed an agreement authorizing the removal and demolition of Changchunli Church under duress (China Aid, 9 July 2009, 27 September 2010).
- On 9 June 2009, authorities raided the Early Rain Church, Chengdu, blocking members from entering to worship. On 21 June, they abolished the church and seized its property on the grounds that it was an illegal organization. Authorities had harassed the church for the previous year, breaking up a weekend family retreat at a resort hotel. They continued to pressure Wang Yi, the church pastor and a prominent human rights lawyer and university academic, to register the church, but Wang refused. Since these events, the church continues to operate, but Wang was prevented from attending a meeting of pastors in Hong Kong in December 2010.

Wang, a blogger, has been a thorn in the side of the Chinese government for some time. He was one of three prominent Christian human rights advocates to have met with President Bush in the White House in 2006. With the Olympics in 2008 and the 60th anniversary of the PRC in 2009, the authorities acted preemptively against a number of such persons and the organizations they represented (Earlyrain; Monitor China 22 February 2011; *Persecution.org* 2009).

- On 25 August 2009, authorities in Rizhao, Shandong, abolished a TSPM church in Shandong because its legally established seminary

had been engaged in unauthorized training of students. It had already graduated one cohort of students and was preparing for the second graduation ceremony when a band of “legal officials” from the local SARA branch and the police department “stormed in” and confiscated Bibles, computers and other materials, stating that they were being used for “illegal religious training at an unregistered church location”. They also revoked the seminary’s registration certificates and ordered that other church property be confiscated as a penalty (China Aid, 25 August 2009).

- On 23 April 2009, Huang Lemin was imprisoned in Leqing, Wenzhou, on charges of causing “intentional injury”. As fellow members of his Baixiang Church – a TSPM church – tell it, he was merely repairing damage to the church’s audio equipment that had been sabotaged by a group of individuals conspiring with authorities to take control of the church. They said that Huang had not attacked anyone but was himself badly beaten by the intruders. After the beating, his fellow Christians took him to the local police station to make a complaint. However, one of his attackers, Yang Huaxi, made counter accusations. Despite injuries to Huang found by the Wenzhou Medical Institute, the police took Yang’s side and arrested Huang. The case has been reported to provincial authorities, but the investigation has gone slowly because of the strong sense of local loyalties and mutual protection among Leqing authorities (China Aid, 2 August 2009).
- On 10 November 2010, police officers and SARA representatives surrounded a church service being held in Shuangcheng, Heilongjiang, confiscating the church’s general ledger. The purported reason was a general increase in suppression of unregistered churches since the convening of the recent Lausanne Congress and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo (China Aid, 10 November 2010).

The above information is incomplete. The reports from China Aid are not compiled with the purpose of giving objective or nuanced accounts of the incidents. Moreover, thorough investigations including the various perspectives on these incidents would be impossible in a country such as the PRC, particularly for a foreign investigator. Nevertheless, set against what the unregistered church leaders said, they provide enough information to re-examine the cases and derive an understanding of the rules of the social contract.

We can ask why the authorities cracked down on these particular churches when there are tens of thousands of others against which no actions that China Aid regards as persecution were taken. This is not a matter of local authorities in Shanghai, Beijing or Guangzhou cracking down on house churches while authorities in Suzhou or Xiamen left them alone. Even in the cities in which crackdowns occurred, one or a few house churches were harassed but far more were left alone. Moreover, while reports of crackdowns on churches usually refer to illegal churches, TSPM churches are legal. What did the TSPM churches cited in the report do that instigated official action? Examining the cases above in light of what I was told in interviews and conversations with persons in the unregistered church movement and by scholars and what is available in documents, we arrive at the following factors.

Factors

First is the nature of the Chinese government. Despite its enormous power, it is insecure (see e.g. Five Books 2010). It sees the maintenance of party control as a core interest (核心利益, *hexin liyi*) (Dai 2009), making it an existential issue for China, but for a variety of reasons it feels very threatened: 4 June, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rejection of communist party governments in former Soviet European satellite states, the colour revolutions, and the problems caused by growing inequality in China itself. It is thus obsessed with stability, and for that reason it seeks a high level of control. It attempts to achieve this control by providing full employment, offering opportunities for the elites to collect rents and enjoy privileged market positions (Pei 2006), and crushing dissent and nipping perceived threats in the bud. Moreover, particularly at the local level, it reduces the possibility of incidents by not interfering in people's activities as long as it perceives no threat to stability, even if these activities are not in accordance with regulations.

Second, as a general rule, size matters. Several unregistered church leaders said that 30 members meeting in one venue was the limit, and unregistered churches often divided their congregations into multiple meeting points to prevent any one meeting point from exceeding that number (cf. Peng 2009). Related to this are official misgivings about networks of churches, particularly those that cross provincial boundaries. The government does not fear small groupings, but it does not want large organizations of people that might become a force against it.

Third, the authorities much prefer house churches to be inconspicuous. This is partly a matter of congregations remaining small and meeting in someone's home and partly one of avoiding central locations. According to Shen Helin – the pen name of a well-educated and knowledgeable underground seminary teacher in the Yangzi region – governments such as Beijing's prefer that house church congregations find places to meet on the outskirts of the city rather than in its centre (personal communication, 7 October 2011). This preference for inconspicuousness is one of the reasons religious groups cannot participate in philanthropy as religious groups but must do so as individuals or as NGOs. For example, Taiwan's Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation dropped "Buddhist" from its name in China in order to become a registered philanthropic organization.

Fourth, the central government can apply a lot of pressure for a general crackdown and far more pressure to suppress a particular group or individual. Provincial governments may also force local governments to take action. For example, a Catholic student at Xiamen University reported that the Catholic students, led by local priests, have an annual Christmas Mass and celebration, but in 2009 the nearly 300-strong gathering was broken up by police; priests and student leaders were detained for several hours and the priests eventually fined. News of this large gathering had reached the provincial government, which ordered that local officials act. Nevertheless, it is usually local officials who decide whether to initiate actions against particular churches, and local officials have their own agendas. These include wanting to have a good performance appraisal. Most important in these appraisals are economic development and maintaining order at the local level. Enforcing religious policy is not a major priority and wins few points; moreover, enforcing it (for example, closing down an illegal church) may meet with resistance from the worshippers and cause unrest, which would result in a poor performance appraisal (see Li 2009). Thus, especially if a bond of trust exists between local officials and house churches, there is no reason for the authorities to do any more than is absolutely necessary. Where house churches have been operating for several years and are not seen as threats to social stability or may even be regarded as beneficial to it, most local officials will leave them alone. According to Xing, this is indeed the case:

The reason why the party-state has changed its view of religion [...] is that in places with a high proportion of religious believers, the crime

rate is generally low, and local cadres have already expressed approval of this. Faith has ameliorated the moral problems affecting society under the impact of secularism. Since religion can make people more virtuous, maintain social stability and help to reduce crime, it has been able to become a part of the construction of spiritual culture (Xing 2003: 23).

Thus, many officials see religious practice as a good thing, and some are even practitioners themselves. In addition, there are what are called “cultural Christians”: that is, those who do not believe in God but are nonetheless positively disposed toward Christian ethics and values (Zhuo 2001; Fällman 2008). Although officials are obliged to tell house church ministers or leaders periodically that they must register, they do not force the issue, and some simply go through the motions: One minister said that in his area, the police come around to inspect unregistered church premises on Wednesdays rather than Sundays so they can report that they had inspected and found no illegal religious activity taking place. As another put it, “local officials have two faces (两张脸, *liang zhang lian*), one they show to their superiors, the other they show to those whom they govern”.

However, officials differ from place to place in how they treat “illegal” religion. When I mentioned to an academic from a poor and remote area in central China who taught at Xiamen University that in several places I visited, officials did nothing that would threaten house churches, he said that was by no means always the case.

My mother became interested in Christian worship when she visited me and my sister here in Xiamen. When she returned home, she and some friends began to worship in each other’s homes. Not long afterward, the police came by and told her that it was illegal and she must give it up. Because my sister and I both achieved quite highly in our hometown, our family has a lot of prestige, and the police were very polite to her. But they were very gruff to the others.

In another case, a rural house church minister was sentenced to two years in prison for “attempting to overthrow the government” (企图颠覆政府, *qitu dianfan zhengfu*), and his church was closed down. However, according to his brother, also a minister, the real reason was because his church was growing too rapidly. This is highly plausible given that rapidly growing house churches are viewed as threatening and are potential targets for official action. Moreover, it is unlikely that someone charged

with attempting to overthrow the government would receive such a light penalty.

In yet another case, an urban house church minister I visited in Jiangsu said that his 40-person church had been discovered three weeks earlier by census takers. He was then visited by the police and officials from the SARA and the Stability and Harmony Bureau (维稳部, *wei-wenbu*) who told him that he must join a TSPM church or stop holding services. He replied that they could not affiliate with the TSPM. The authorities stressed the law that house churches were illegal. He argued back that freedom of worship was their human right and was also guaranteed in the Constitution, and that the church made a contribution to the community. The problem was the church's size: They would overlook his house church only if it was under 20 persons. Finally they told him not to carry out worship in that district (区, *qu*), but to go elsewhere – where it would be someone else's problem. The Sunday prior to my visit, his congregation had worshiped in a park.

His being told to take his worship venue to a neighbouring district points to another aspect of local officialdom, the “domicile principle” (属地原则, *shudi yuanze*). Traditionally in China, one “belonged” both culturally and administratively to the county in which one's ancestors were buried, and that principle still holds today through the household (户口, *hukou*) registration system. I once asked Shen Helin whether his teaching in underground seminaries put him in danger.

No, not as long as I don't teach in my home area. Because I “belong” there, the local officials are responsible for my behaviour. If I do something elsewhere, I'm out of their area of responsibility, so they don't care, and I'm also not the responsibility of the officials where I commit the act, so they don't worry about me, either. As we say, a rabbit does not nibble the grass around its own burrow (兔子不吃窝边草, *Tuzi bu che wo bian cao*).

Thus, by teaching elsewhere, he stays under the radar. For a similar reason, he said he did not want to become famous. Not being famous, he has not attracted attention to himself or his activities.

To return to the above cases of persecution, in several of the incidents – Shouwang, Wanbang, Linfen, Liangren – size and rate of growth are probable contributing factors, though in none of these cases are they the only factors. According to Shen Helin, in the case of Shouwang, it was not only that the authorities wanted to prevent the creation of large groups not under some sort of government control as TSPM churches

are, but also that many Shouwang members are scholars, lawyers, publishers, journalists and the like. This brought a certain level of notoriety to Shouwang, inspiring other unregistered churches to emulate them. Moreover, he continued, the Shouwang leaders pushed the envelope too far, attempting to register and in the process legitimize Shouwang itself, which would also set a precedent for house churches attaining official recognition and legitimacy.

In the other three cases, although they differ in some respects, one commonality was having a political agenda. Wanbang was large and growing rapidly, but in addition, Minister Cui had organized a meeting of the Urban House Church Pastors Fellowship. Although there are many house church networks in China, the government views them with suspicion, especially when they cross provincial borders, which the fellowship, an unregistered organization, did. In the case of Liangren, Minister Wang Dao had been politically active in the past, and given this background, his building up a following attracted official attention, all the more so since he was targeting university students and workers. Moreover, his wife was involved with kindergartens suspected of teaching religion to minors (illegal in China) in three provinces, and she was also part of a Chinese delegation at the time focusing on democracy and religious freedom in Washington, DC.

The Linfen case is similar but more complicated. On one hand, it is a network of churches, albeit local, with 50,000 members, which makes it very large, much larger than other churches that suffered from government action. On the other hand, the fact that it had built several buildings for worship, one reportedly seven stories high, shows that local authorities had overlooked its activities for quite some time. Moreover, the local government offered compensation for the damage done when it was raided, implying that it had some sort of informal legitimacy, at least to the local government. Most likely, the precipitating cause for government action was the “political” activities of its chief minister, Wang Xiaoguang; according to Shen Helin, Wang was among the several church leaders who had been sending reports on government persecution of house churches to China Aid. Fulton holds that foreign involvement or political motives are important reasons for government action against individual churches (Fulton 2009).

All the above churches were also conspicuous and well known to the public. The government prefers that religion, in particular “illegal” religion such as that practised in unregistered churches, remain out of

sight. This is probably why the baptismal service being conducted by the Beijing house church was halted; it was being conducted in public – and also at a time (the run-up to the 60th anniversary celebration of the founding of the PRC) when security in Beijing was very tight and there was, according to China Aid (25 August 2009), an order to close down six unregistered churches.

We can assume that Pastor Han of the Immanuel Church was arrested for very similar reasons to those of Wang Xiaoguang. As an ethnic Korean, though a Chinese national, his contacts with South Korean missionaries would have made him suspect. South Korean missionaries have played an active role in the evangelization of China, and Chinese Christian groups have helped North Koreans who have escaped into China make their way across the border where they can ask to be sent to South Korea. Moreover, allowing the South Korean to attend his service was illegal because Chinese law forbids foreigners attending worship services with Chinese nationals except at designated TSPM churches, although that rule, like so many others, is enforced selectively.

The two Shandong churches differ from those above in that they are both TSPM churches. The Rizhao church was abolished ostensibly because it was conducting illegal seminary activity. Whether that is the “real” reason is questionable, however, as there is a good deal of illegal seminary activity going on in China, even training for house church ministers in TSPM churches (Vala 2009). The Changchunli Church incident, from the evidence available, appears to be a property grab, an all-too-common occurrence in China (see Yu 2010). However, both could also stem from personal disputes between the church leaders and local officials.

The reason for the imprisonment of Huang Lemin is also likely to be local in that, first, Wenzhou is probably the most liberal area vis-à-vis unregistered churches and religion in general, and second, it involves an individual church member rather than a church or church leader. It is possible that there was a dispute between Huang and his accuser, Yang Haoxi, with Yang able to call on the police to help him. Or it could be a struggle over control of a particular house church by contending “boss” Christians – local Christian entrepreneurs for whom establishing and running a church is a source of prestige, who treat “their” parishioners as employees (see Cao 2008, 2011) – with Huang and Yang merely being pawns representing the real contenders.

Summarizing the “rules” of the “social contract” between government and unregistered churches, in general those which remain small, dividing their congregations and establishing more meeting points when membership climbs above 30, are free to operate. Over time, as they operate without incident and perhaps make positive contributions to the community, or as officials actually become believers, local governments increasingly trust them and their position is safer. However, this depends on the attitudes of local officials.

Small unregistered churches do not run into problems of being conspicuous; indeed in larger cities, even their neighbours may not know that they exist. However, churches such as Wanbang and Shouwang, whose congregation sizes reach 1,000 or more, cannot help but attract attention. Moreover, according to Shen Helin, one reason why the government has prevented the Shouwang church moving into its recently purchased quarters is that the space can accommodate approximately 1,000 worshippers; moreover, it is in a relatively central area of Beijing. The Beijing government would prefer that it move to the outskirts of the city and break its congregation up into smaller groups.

Discussion and Conclusions: The Protestant Church-State Relationship and the Party-State’s Dilemma

The Protestant church-state relationship needs to be divided into registered and unregistered Protestant churches. The former, being under the TSPM, are mostly government-controlled and do the SARA’s bidding. However, some TSPM churches and seminaries allow unregistered groups to use their facilities for training or worship (Lee 2007: 293); as we saw above, these are not condoned by the SARA. There is also a brain drain of TSPM-trained clergy to unregistered churches, resulting in a severe deficit in the TSPM churches.

The state-unregistered church relationship is far less uniform. Some variation is based on region: Lee identifies Hebei and areas near the centres of power as very strict while Hunan, Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia and the southeast coast, with its links to various overseas Chinese communities, are more lax (Lee 2007: 279). Another factor is what Vala terms “imperfect implementation”. The governance of religion is based on the Constitution, which grants freedom of religious belief, and on regulations at the central, provincial and local levels, some of which are vague

or inconsistent. Moreover, and most importantly, they are open to local interpretation (Vala 2008: 104, 110-111; Fällman 2008: 959) and implemented flexibly according to *guanxi* (关系): As Hunter and Chan put it, “if personal relationships are strong, almost anything is possible” (1993: 183). Cao illustrates this flexibility, noting that in liberal Wenzhou where extensive social networks embed all sorts of people, Christmas has become a “public community event” (2011: 2-3), and a local Christian entrepreneur was appointed district party secretary over a party member (2011: 29).

Should the party-state be worried about the growth of Protestantism and the lax implementation of regulations? On one hand, worry is unnecessary. Protestants, though they challenge the government on religious practice, are overwhelmingly law-abiding in other areas, and do not generally involve themselves in politics. Their social involvement tends to be in philanthropy. On the other hand, a challenge is a challenge, and this one is executed by both rural and urban believers, so there is no sign that it will abate. Wielander states that the unregistered church movement “presents the most important challenge to the government since that of the *qigong* movement in the 1990s” (2009a: 165-166). Moreover, she and others see repression as ineffective because Protestants see suffering as their own sacrifice in the manner of Christ’s far greater sacrifice. They see arrests “as an opportunity to get a free ride in a car [and] stints in prison are seen as a good opportunity to evangelize fellow inmates (often successfully)” (Wielander 2009a: 177; see also Lee 2007: 299).

The party-state’s dilemma is that although the present Hu-Wen regime is more liberal toward grass-roots groups than previous administrations were (Shambaugh 2008: 178), and it sees religion as a potentially positive force in society, it is also uncomfortable with religion and wants to control it (Dunch 2008: 155). However, the growth in Protestantism does not bode well for implementing control. Suppressing it would require a huge effort and the imposition of a level of social control equal to or exceeding that of the Cultural Revolution period and extended to the countryside. The government probably has the necessary military and public security forces to enforce the closure of all unregistered churches and compel all believers to worship only in registered churches, but the costs would be very high, raising the level of discontent with the regime and perhaps even destabilizing it (see Fulton 2009). Moreover, there is a

real possibility that the effort would fail as it did during the Cultural Revolution.

However, there is little doubt that the party-state sees this as a challenge it needs to win. Shambaugh states that China saw the downfall of communist party governments in Eastern Europe in 1989 as caused by “enfranchising labour unions, *autonomous churches* and other civic organizations [, which is] a slippery slope to enfranchising a political opposition” (2008: 168; emphasis added). This is in line with China’s state corporatist policy, by which it would feel a need to assert its control over the unregistered churches. However, Shambaugh also feels that the social agenda of Hu-Wen – tackling such issues as poverty, the environment and corruption – requires that the leadership change their “zero-sum thinking about civil society” if they are to carry out these changes (2008: 170).

Shambaugh remains generally confident that Chinese officials will continue to perceive weaknesses in the system – signs of “atrophy”, as he puts it – but will also continue to adapt as they have since the beginning of the reforms in the 1980s. However, he concludes, along with several other experts whose prognostications he examines, that the adaptations will not be anything drastic or decisive but will simply be the party-state’s muddling through (2008: 172, 173). Given what is presently happening – greater official tolerance of religion than in the first three decades of CCP rule, but government demanding control of belief and practice; churches growing in strength and refusing to accept government control; large urban churches pushing the boundaries of government toleration and regrouping when suppressed; and regulations controlling religion inconsistently enforced at local levels, plus occasional crackdowns on churches overstepping the boundaries but failing to strike a decisive blow – continuing to “muddle through” is very likely and is perhaps the only practical feasible choice.

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