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The Development of Christianity in Contemporary China

Chu Yi Lu

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Carol Ward, Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

### The Development of Christianity in Contemporary China

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Master of Science

The purpose of this research is to study the development of Christianity in contemporary China. It adds to the limited literature that explores how Christianity has developed as the fastest growing religion in China post the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The data derive from semi-structured and focus group interviews with Chinese Christians and field observation notes collected at both official and non-official Christian churches in Beijing. I found an ambivalent attitude toward the development of Christianity across different social levels in China. At the state level, the Chinese government expects Christianity to provide a much-needed stabilizing influence in an increasingly self-centered and materialistic society. At the same time, the government fears that Christianity's increasing power may pose a threat to the Communist regime. Correspondingly, at the community level, Chinese Christians wish to see an increasing Christian influence throughout Chinese society to improve people's quality of life, but many Chinese traditionalists oppose the increased Christian influence that seems to be supplanting traditional Chinese culture. These disagreements do not seem to have seriously impeded the development of Christianity in China today. Applying a pervasive cultural perspective – the lens of Yin-Yang interaction – to the current situation of the Christian churches in China, I find that the Yin traits within Christianity and the Yang traits embedded in the Chinese political ideology are coexisting paradoxical values whose interaction facilitates an acceptance, or at least sanction, of oppositions that have reshaped the social and political landscape of Chinese society and fostered the continuing growth of Christianity in China.

Keywords: China, religion, Christianity, official Christian churches, non-official churches, Chinese government, Yin Yang

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout Chinese history, Christianity has been perceived as a foreign and marginalized religion. It has never been entirely accepted or assimilated into Chinese culture and society (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 2013). Many Chinese patriots in the 1900s compared Christianity and opium side by side and condemned them as conspiracies utilized by Western imperialists to paralyze Chinese people and colonize Chinese territories (Vala 2012 and 2013). For instance, the Boxer Rebellion of 1899 to 1901 and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 were demonstrations organized by Chinese civilians confronting Western intrusion and the influence of Christian faith on Chinese minds (Xiong 2012). The Chinese Communist government has generally opposed Christianity and cited historical conflicts as justification for its restrictions.

Regardless of skepticism and rejection at the national level, “since 1979, China has experienced a widespread revival of religious faith and practice” (Lai 2003). In fact, Christianity has become the fastest growing religion in China. In the early 1980s, the Chinese Christian population was only 3 million (Vala 2013), but by the early 2000s, it has grown to 150 million (Yang 2006; Luo 2001; Li 1999). In a national population of 1.3 billion this figure may not seem significant, but it takes on greater meaning when it is noted that the number of Chinese Christians exceeds the number of Communist Party members. As of June 2013, according to Xinhua News, 85 million Chinese were members of the Chinese Communist Party. In other words, the expansion of Christianity over the last thirty years has weakened the official position that Christianity serves capitalist imperialism. Moreover, the proportion of Chinese Christians in the state-sanctioned church is declining. “A recent nationwide survey put the number of all Protestants at more than 40 million (Horizon Research 2007), but roughly half of all believers worship outside official religious venues that are monitored by state officials” (Vala 2013:61)

Christianity has faced many changes and adjustments in the “new” China, which has been developing since the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1976. For example, Christianity is no longer perceived as a backward religion that only provides spiritual and emotional supports to women, uneducated people, and rural farmers (Leung 2013). Instead, its congregational structure offers a social-belonging aspect that has intensified its influence in urban areas and fostered continued growths in these areas. In fact, the positive social impact of Christian faith has convinced the Chinese government to accept the perspective of German sociologist and political economist Max Weber, who argued that a strong work ethic, love for one’s neighbor, self-discipline and trust often accompanies Protestantism and can be essential and beneficial to the maintenance of social stability and economic growth (Weber 2013).

Although the majority of contemporary Chinese claim to be atheists, ancestral worship and polytheistic rituals are prevalent throughout Chinese society. China’s vast territory, large population, and 5000-year cultural and national history ensure that aspects of Chinese lifestyle and thinking driven by Confucian and Taoist teachings and Chinese popular religion have persisted in spite of the overthrow of dynasties (Xiong 2012). One may argue that Chinese society and people have become more secular and less religious as a consequence of the outlawing of religious practices during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Nevertheless, many traditions, rituals, and cultural elements endured despite the Cultural Revolution and Chairman Mao Zedong’s coming the central figure for “religious” worship. Even though religious practice and belief were banned from the public sphere, many Chinese Christians remained faithful to God. They were convinced that God would forgive their public denial or renouncement of their affiliation to Christianity, because He clearly knew what their hearts truly believed (Madsen 1991). Silent prayers and daily worship rituals of Mao were major

keys in preserving religious practices and beliefs that were banned at the time, such as Confucian teaching of Filial Piety and incense offering to the dead. After Mao's death in 1976, polytheistic worship resumed in China, and God, Buddha, and Taoist and Chinese folklore deities resurfaced in the public sphere.

In such a complex, pluralistic cultural-political environment, it is fascinating to see how Christianity, a monotheistic religion, has not only gained a foothold but has become developed as the fastest growing religion in China. The key question is what has allowed Christianity to become the fastest growing religion in China despite its historical conflicts with the Chinese state. In addressing this question, I have taken a qualitative approach to study the development of Christianity and its roles in contemporary China, assessing the types of relationship between Christianity and Chinese society at the social level. By participating in religious activities, observing participants at research sites, and interviewing Chinese Christians in China, I have learned about being a Christian in an atheist mainstream society and about the social and political impact of Christianity on Chinese urban areas after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. It is apparent that after more than three decades of reviving and developing, Christian churches continue to expand in China, influenced by interaction between Christian ideology and the Chinese state culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many classical theorists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx studied the nature of religion and its impact on society in a great measure. As western society gradually became modernized under the secular influence of science, technology, and capitalism, scholars began to question the authority of religion in all

aspects of social life and governance. Their arguments set the stage for exploring the role of religion, specifically Christianity in contemporary China.

One of the major focuses of this research is the continuity and resurgence of organized religion under conditions where Durkheim and Weber in particular would have predicted the continuing “disenchantment” of society or the withering away of traditional religions. Since Christianity has not only survived under suppression, but has also pierced through the hard crust to sprout, bloom, and thrive in a highly monitored environment (Madsen 2010). The phenomenon of increasing Christian influence in China challenges the notion of inevitable social disenchantment. It allows a case study of the emergence of religion in a setting where, by law, there was none. Then, what role does religion or Christianity have in Chinese society?

For Durkheim and Simmel, religion was not solely a divine or theological institution, but rather, an integral part of society. As a social institution, it addressed concerns with man’s social conditions in society by providing social solidarity and a sense of belonging or community. For Simmel, “religion was an integrating, unifying element”, the product of society or “a reality related to the empirical” ((Thompson 1982; Simmel 1959: viii). It was the highest authority that united individuals and consolidated social cohesion in a society. Similarly for Durkheim, “religion was the soul of society” (Bellah 1973:191), consisting of “obligatory beliefs united with definite practices, which relate to the objects given in the beliefs” (Durkheim 1915:246; Coser 1977 and 1971:136). However, Durkheim also contended that religion was on its deathbed. When the social structure of a society evolved from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, expertise or science would replace religion as the source of social cohesion. At that point non-believers and casual, disinterested believers would predominate.

Correspondingly, Weber postulated a similar outcome for religion as society gradually became industrialized and capitalized. The processes of rationalization were associated with the development of disenchantment and secularization (Bellah 1973). When the world was understood and managed by logical systems and scientific reason, religion would decline as religiosity became increasingly irrelevant to the ethical and spiritual needs of mankind (Walton 2003). In the Weberian and Durkheimian views such outcomes are considered natural, inevitable and universal. When modernization takes its course in society, rationalization and intellectualization supercede religion by privatizing religion at a personal level and secularizing society at social level (Walton 2003).

The classical theories of religion provide insightful perspective on the effects of religion on society. Nevertheless, their theoretical contributions on the role of religion in society are limited by their historical context. In many ways they fall short in explaining the rebirth or resurrection of religion in secularized or even atheist environments. For example, it is claimed that religion dies in a natural process of intellectualization and rationalization, then we cannot explain why there has been rapid growth of religious membership and the emergence of diverse Christian denominations in contemporary China, especially, after the Chinese Cultural Revolution, a decade in which the state purposefully outlawed all religious practices. China is an interesting case in that it not only contradicts what major social theorists have predicted concerning the continuing “disenchantment” of society, but it also represents the emergence of religion in a setting where, by law, there was none.

Many contemporary theorists have critiqued the classical secularization thesis, arguing that religion has continued to play a vital role in the lives of individuals worldwide. For instance, there is considerable research on the development of Christianity in China. Major themes include

historical studies of the initial importing of Christianity into China around 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and processes whereby Christianity survived the government-initiated attack and demolition during the Cultural Revolution (Xiong 2012; Marsh 2011; Madsen 1991). Other social and political have studies addressed how the Chinese constitutions and government regulation have affected the relationships of the Christian churches with local governments and diversified their institutional structures (Yoshiko and Wank 2009; Laliberte 2011; Madsen 1991); how Marxist influence and state-monitoring have created a massive underground structure of churches and religious communities since they were re-legalized in the 1980s (Yoshiko and Wank 2009); and how both state-sanctioned and underground churches have increased in China as a consequence of heavy governmental regulation (Yang 2006; Fan and Whitehead 2005 and 2011). Moreover, scholars of Chinese religions have measured religiosity by analyzing religious attendance, membership records, and religious participation (Yang 2006).

Many of these studies have focused on the early history of the development of Christianity in China. For instance, most of the Christian churches in China during the 1900s were funded and organized by foreign priests. Foreign missionaries were the main actors preaching and proselyting. Aspects of modern science, medicine, technology, and education were introduced to Chinese society as foreign missionaries established all sorts of institutions in China before the Communist Party took over China in 1949 (Madsen 1991). In contrast is the Chinese government's accusation that the purpose of Christianity was to spread superstitions to uneducated and poor people in Chinese rural areas.

Many studies on religion in China following the Chinese Cultural Revolution were focused on the functionalities and the impacts of religion within groups and institutions in China during the 1980s and 1990s (Madsen 1991; Lee and Chow 2013). They revealed the kinds of

relationship between religious institutions and the Chinese government that resulted from a long period of suppression of religious activities. However, these studies hold an outdated view of religiosity in China today; they continue to see the lack of religious freedom in China from a top-down approach that focuses on the amount of power that the Chinese state has had over religions throughout Chinese history. They underestimate the impact of Christianity at the social or interpersonal level.

In a recent study concerning the growth of religious membership and the emergence of diverse religious organizations in contemporary Chinese society, Fenggang Yang, utilized Stark's and Finke's economic model, which was originally applied to differentiate among religious markets in European and American countries. In Yang's view, the emergence of religious institutions and the increase in religious membership in China reflect the activities of a "market" of current and potential adherents in relation to "a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents and the religious culture offered by the organization" (2006: 94; Stark and Finke 2000). Accordingly, Yang categorized the existing religious institutions in China into three colored markets based on their legal statuses in the Chinese constitution. For instance, the red market comprises all state-sanctioned religious institutions that are subject to the Buddhist Association of China, the Islamic Association of China, the Christian Three-Selfs Patriotic Movement Committee of China, the Taoist Association of China, and the Catholic Patriotic Association of China. These associations were established in the 1950s to serve as an integral part of the control mechanisms of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) religious policy (Yang 2011). The black market consists of those outlawed religious institutions, such as *Falun Gong*; and the gray market, the most complex, includes many religious institutions that are neither outlawed nor officially sanctioned (Yang 2006).

The triple-colored religious market theory allows researchers to move away from the focus on the government's authority over religion by arguing that the religious system in China is more complicated than the five state-sanctioned religions registered in the Chinese Constitution. However, this theory does not take into account the changes and improvements that have occurred as Christian churches have developed in Chinese urban areas in recent years.

History is important in providing the context and background that helps to explain what happened to Christianity, how it happened, why it happened, and most importantly, how all these have affected the development of Christianity in China until today. Unfortunately, the triple-colored market theory does not fully explain "how" Christianity has developed historically, nor the dramatic rise of numerous non-state-sanctioned Christian churches in China today. In other words, the theory is essentially a typology. It does not explain the process that takes the development of religion in China from point A to point B. Moreover, there are many questions regarding its validity in analyzing the religious market from an economic perspective. For instance, it is difficult to prove the existence of a religious market in China because religious freedom is limited and is still controlled by the Chinese central government. Also, it does not demonstrate how the triple-colored religious market includes all religious institutions, both state-sanctioned and non-state-sanctioned religions in China. When government officials do not even have a clear guideline in managing and categorizing newly emerged religious institutions, then how do we know to which colored market these institutions belong? Additional questions include whether the assigned color statuses are fixed or changeable and what would be the procedures or requirements to determine the legal statuses if emerging innovative arrangements?

My research involves spending time at various Christian Churches in Beijing to observe Christian church activities and participation and to conduct interviews with Chinese

Christians, investigating the relationships between these churches and the Chinese government from a bottom-up research approach, or at the social level. A bottom-up research approach provides an alternative perspective in conceptualizing the kind of relationship between Christianity and the Chinese government, since the meanings and functions of religions may differ by level of analysis (Weber 1991).

Another influence on my decision to study this topic using qualitative methods relates to the limited data available on Chinese Christians. Scholars of Chinese religions have attempted to measure Chinese religiosity by analyzing religious attendance, membership records, and religious participation (Yang 2006). However, there are several concerns regarding to the reliability of the available data on Christian populations in China. First, the accuracy of information on active Christians in China is debatable. Due to a large discrepancy between government official reports and non-government reports, many argue that most of the reports prepared by the Chinese officials have excluded those Christians that participate in “house” churches and “underground” churches <sup>1</sup>(Yang 2006).

The non-government reports are also contestable. Researchers who have investigated Christian churches in China, especially in the urban areas, are aware that most of the Protestant Christian churches in China do not keep systematic records of membership or Sunday attendance of their members. This is especially true at the state-sanctioned churches due to some unique

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<sup>1</sup> “House churches” are state allowed churches although they are not state-registered. “Underground churches,” first organized in small groups by foreigners working and doing business in China, held their meetings in people’s homes. These religious practices and beliefs seemed incompatible with the state-sanctioned Protestantism and Catholicism. The term continues to hold negative connotations and is usually associated with “evil cults” or “malpractices.” For more information about the difference between house churches and underground churches, please see section *From “Underground” Churches to “House” Churches* on page 75-76 in this report.

circumstances. State-sanctioned churches have a fixed place or facility for their weekly congregations and usually meet in large assemblies.<sup>2</sup> The church leaders and priests usually conduct four to five sessions from which church attendees may choose each Sunday. The situation can become more complicated since people attending state-sanctioned churches may also visit house churches simultaneously or from time to time.

## SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In this section I provide a brief overview of the social and historical context regarding religions in China and the religion-relevant long and short-term impacts of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the development of Chinese society. This information will help to frame the contributions of the present research.

### *Religions in China*

“China is a country with long history of religious practices” (Xiong 2012). Before the establishment of People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, five different kinds of religious teachings, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches of Christian religion, were constitutionally recognized in China (Yang 2006; Madsen 1991). The government at the time even established religious associations not only to regulate their religious activities in a more systematic and effective way, but also to try to distinguish them from other illegal or unconstitutional religious institutions in China, such as underground and international-affiliated churches. Moreover, the Chinese Constitution stated that all these religious associations are subject to the Regulations on Registration Administration of Associations.

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<sup>2</sup> When I was conducting my research in one of the state-sanctioned Protestant churches in Beijing, I found that keeping attendance was an impossible task to accomplish because there are usually about 1000 to 2000 people attending each session. Inconsistent church attendance also made my research difficult as I tried to differentiate the interviewees according to their church affiliations.

Taoism was the only indigenous religion in China; other religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, were religious teachings exported to China. There was a great diversity in the new religious movements across China before the Chinese Cultural Revolution took place. For example, according to Xiong (2012:1), Christianity had existed in China as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, disappearing for hundreds of years, and then being reintroduced. At the end of the Ming dynasty in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jesuits arrived in Beijing via Guangzhou. The most famous of the Jesuit missionaries was Matteo Ricci, an Italian mathematician who came to China in 1588 and lived in Beijing in 1600.

Despite the diversity of religious institutions in China, religion has never gained the recognition in Chinese society that it has in countries in the West. Throughout Chinese history, it has always played a latent or covert role. What is unique about the role of traditional religion in China is its level of involvement in Chinese political and social institutions. According to Waldron, the role of traditional religion in China is closely linked with state matters: the legitimacy of a ruler or a political leader relies on religious validation (1998).

China's culture changed dramatically after the establishment of the PRC in the 1940s as leaders sought moral and political sanctions from communist and socialist ideology. In the process of eliminating the impact of Chinese traditions on Chinese ways of thinking and living, religious practices became separate from the state and removed from the public sphere. Religion became something more personal, individual, and associated with private organizations. When religious revival began it grew far beyond the manageable change Chinese leaders had envisioned in the 1980s and 1990s: it was "a powerful force that demands for religious freedom and change that may seem strange or

even subversive to many government officials, especially the status quo the regime seeks to preserve” (Waldron 1998).

### *The “New China” under Mao’s Leadership*

The Chinese Communist Party became the one and only state government of China in 1949. The victory over the National Party led by Chiang Kai-shek granted the Communist Party and Mao’s leadership considerable recognition, trust, and support from the Chinese people. However, “the military success of the Chinese communist in 1949 could not ensure a more responsive and democratic government and economic and social equality” (Schaefer and Torre 2007). In order to secure Mao’s legitimacy in the Party and the country, Mao Zedong and his supporters launched mass campaigns in the 1950s (One Hundred Flowers) and the 1960s (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) to revive the public’s commitment to communist ideas and values, to weaken the grip of the traditional bureaucracy over the Chinese government, and to remove capitalist, traditional, and cultural elements from Chinese society (Schaefer and Torre 2007; Madsen 1991).

Mao and his disciples were convinced that severing the ties between the local churches and foreign churches would bring people closer and more committed to communist ideas and values. Thus, the government took an indirect and moderate approach in reorganizing religions in China at the early stage of cleansing religious elements throughout China (Yang 2011). The communist government introduced the “three-selfs” principle to the churches, and suggested all Christian churches in China should become “self-ruling, self-supporting, and self-propagating” (Yang 2011:68).

Because reconstructing a “Red China” was the Party’s essential goal during the Cultural movement, Mao and his Party supporters realized that the only way they could move forward

with communist and socialist ideas was to abandon what was commonly referred to as the Four Olds: Chinese Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas (Schaefer and Torre 2007). As a result, religious beliefs, rituals, and religious activities ceased entirely throughout the country.

During the Cultural Revolution, the young Red Guards became Mao's missionaries. They referred to Mao as the Savior of Chinese people, depicted him as the rising sun from the East, "the son of heaven, and the color red, all of which may be found in songs, speeches, writings, and the Little Red Book" (Yeo 2002:149). Mao Zedong became the new object for people's daily worship. "Individuals and families would gather before a portrait of Mao to ask for instruction at the start of a day, confess at the close of the day, memorize portions of the Little Red Book, sing hymns exalting Mao as the 'Great Helmsman,' take pilgrimages to his birthplace, visit other sites that related to his life; and carried the Little Red Book" (Zuo 1991:103). As a consequence, it should not be a surprise that the revival of religions quickly gained ground inside China after Mao's death in 1976; religious practices were already in place; only the figure of worship was changed.

#### *The Development of Christianity after the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and brought new prospects to China under Deng Xiaoping's leadership; his political agenda readjusted and recovered China from the state of anarchy and chaos by focusing primarily on the improvement of foreign policy with Western countries and economic reform in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and military. Many social and cultural aspects of society that were virtually outlawed from 1966 to 1976 were restored for the purpose of returning China to normality (Halsall 1995). According to the Human Rights in China and Minority Rights Group

International (2007), there is an expectation by the Chinese government to give autonomy and religious freedom to protect and encourage cultural identity as China has undergone rapid social and economic change over the past 25 years. Nevertheless, the Chinese religious and ethnic minorities, especially the Mongols, Tibetans, and Uyghurs, have been mistreated due to government marginalization, negligence, and restriction. These negative sentiments and tensions increasingly threaten the social stability of Chinese society. The Chinese government paid little attention to cultural and religious development over the years. As indicated by the Document 19 drafted by the Central Committee of the Chinese of the Chinese Party on March 31, 1982, many Party members, including Deng under Marxist influence, were convinced that religion would eventually disappear when a classless society was established (MacInnis 1989). However, the Party failed to foresee the rapid growth of religion after its revival in the early 1980s. China's outdated policy on religion and religious freedom not only failed to provide the framework it needed for religion to develop, but they also fostered the "rising and destabilizing level of inequality, social unrest and protests fuelled by growing social inequality and rights violations" in recent years (Human Rights in China and Minority Rights Groups 2007).

### *Inside China Today*

Today, even though the Marxist view of religion as "the opium of the masses" continues to affect the country's policy making and dominates much of Chinese way of life, religions have become an indispensable part of preserving Chinese culture and traditions (Ye 2001). Most importantly, in line with Durkheim's view of religion as an important component of social structure, they have given religion seekers a sense of identity and belonging in Chinese society today. They provide social control, cohesion, and purpose for people, and foster communication and the reaffirmation of social norms (Bellah 1973).

As mentioned earlier, the initial goal of Deng's early reform in the 1980s was to improve the nation's economy, but changes soon took place across other fields ranging from politics to culture. Deng's economic reform opened China to foreign investment, and Jiang Zemin continued in market reform and pushed for greater economic openness (Tisdell 2009). A few urban areas in the southern part of China, such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, developed more rapidly than the rest of the country due to the Open Door Policy. Their increasing contacts with Hong Kong and other foreign countries were able to draw many foreign companies, especially when China established the Special Economic Zones which provided benefits and freedom to foreign companies (Shawki 1997). Foreign investments not only made China the world's biggest trading nation, but also turned China into world's second biggest consumer (Dellios 2005). Consequently, many Western cultural elements, beliefs, and traditions were introduced to Chinese people by foreigners living all over China.

Although China has made considerable economic progress during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, behind the successes, social and political problems have proliferated. The Communist Party tried to lead people toward a higher quality of life, but many social problems, such as an increasing income gap between the rich and the poor, worsening corruption among public servants, and failure to achieve social integration and to meet public demands for increased democracy, outweighed economic achievements (Poushter 2013). As a result, the general public is growing unhappy and dissatisfied with government's performance, and such sentiments have brought incessant social upheavals and instabilities in Chinese communities (Cheng 2014).

Given their disappointments in the government, people have lost trust. Many turned to religion for spiritual and emotional support. For instance, an anonymous *Xi'an* government official asserted that, "the more developed our country's economy, the more we need faith; it is

time to kindle our beliefs and values” (Huang, He, et al. 2012). Although this may seem counterintuitive, views such as Marx’s perspective on religion as “the opium of the masses” have suggested that Christianity and other religions might offer some promising solutions for resolving the ongoing social instabilities and unrests in Chinese society. Consequently, state support for somewhat greater religious freedom may also indicate the state’s interest in solving some social issues. The present study of the interaction between Christian faith and elements of Chinese culture and society is in line with this interest.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research is how Christianity has developed and adjusted in contemporary China, that is, in post-Chinese Cultural Revolution China. In order to answer this broad question, three topics are pursued: (1) the development of Christian churches in China today, (2) the experiences of being a Christian, and (3) the interaction between Christianity and traditional Chinese and contemporary cultures in China today.

### RESEARCH METHODS

At the early stage of developing the framework for this research, there were many unanswered questions pertaining to the development of Christianity in China post-Chinese Cultural Revolution. I was not clear about whether or not religious freedom had increased or declined. There were news articles and scholarly publications, on the one hand, saying that the Chinese government still heavily suppressed Christianity from public recognition and kept religious leaders from holding church worship services. For example, many Christian churches have participated actively in rescue and relief efforts of following natural disasters over the years in China, but these religious organizations were never acknowledged publicly for showing their unselfish concern for the welfare of others.

On the other hand, due to the Chinese government's awareness of the impact of Christianity on the Western economy, the government encouraged Chinese scholars to study Christian influence in the West and hoped to embrace Christianity for its supposed economic and social benefits. Therefore, in a situation when there seemed to be no clear answer to my questions about Christianity and its current role or impact in Chinese society I followed, Cao's (2011: 12) suggestion that, "qualitative research represents a useful starting point for researchers."

A grounded theory research approach is particularly useful since it involves an inductive process of data collection that provides data relevant to answering research questions (Creswell 2009) for topics on which there is little prior research (Crooks 2001). The aim of grounded theory is to generate or "discover a theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser and Strauss 1967:2; Bound 2011). Without making an assumption or hypothesis prior to the research (Charmaz 2000), a theory takes shape as a consequence of that data (Bound 2011). In other words, grounded theory encourages a theory to emerge through the process of repeated comparison and verification of collected data (Bound 2011).

This qualitative research is based on data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Additionally, I obtained basic descriptive data, such as demographic characteristics, for participants in the state-sanctioned and non-state-sanctioned Christian churches in Beijing. I studied and compared the data collected through in-depth interviews with Chinese Christians as well as field notes taken during observations at religious activities and Christian churches in Beijing. All the interviews for this research were conducted in Mandarin. After creating a list of central themes and concepts I selected quotes and parts of the interviews which were relevant and important to those themes and translated them into English.

All the data collected at the preliminary stage were transcribed into texts for in-depth analysis. I first extracted the key points from these texts and coded them into themes or categories. According to Campbell, “categories are the first elements of grounded theory. A category is simply a group of incidents/concepts which are grouped together” (Bound 2011). Within each general category, subsets of specific codes were developed to connect and link similar concepts (Corbin and Strauss 2008). During the analytic process, these codes and categories always remain open and flexible for future adjustments; initial analytical thoughts can be altered as thinking changes and more data are collected in the field (Glaser 1978). For example, a few questions arose during the preliminary stage of analysis that required me to take a second trip to Beijing in 2013 to specifically gather information on these emerging topics. Hence, during my second time in the field I conducted more interviews with a focus primarily on the experiences of Chinese Christians to understand the meaning of Christian identity in Chinese mainstream society.

### *Research Site*

There are several reasons for choosing Beijing as the research site. One of the main ones is that prior to my study at Brigham Young University, I lived and worked in Beijing for nearly two years. I know Beijing fairly well, from its culture to its political climates. My social networks in Beijing were critical sources for developing the interview data. Initially I did not know exactly how sensitive it was for people to talk about religion or to share their religious experiences. My early work at the research sites revealed that finding potential research participants on my own I learned that and establishing trust with some Chinese Christians was quite difficult, some felt uncomfortable sharing their religious experiences with me. Therefore,

the help of my friends and their personal connections was crucial, with their help, I was able to more easily recruit research participants and establish rapport.

Second, Beijing has been the heart of China for many Chinese emperors and Chinese leaders in the past. Its culture includes both traditional and modern elements. Because it is highly political, the development of Christianity is sensitive to government regulation and surveillance. Despite rather unfavorable conditions for the development of Christianity, Beijing has the attention of the world and is expected to meet the needs of its citizens as well as foreigners. Therefore, the decisions and policies of the Chinese central government can capture a great deal of attention in local and international media. This makes Beijing a more favorable place to study the development of Christianity than other urban areas in China, particularly for research focusing on the interaction between Christian ideology and Chinese cultural elements in Chinese urban areas.

Third, because of vast opportunities for jobs, excellent education, and many historical and recreational attractions for tourism, Beijing attracts people from all over the world. It has a population of 22 million, of whom 8 or 9 million are foreigners and Chinese from other provinces and who labor without benefit of legal residency (Qi Xiao, 2010). Beijing is different from other Chinese urban areas, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. It is still heavily dominated by the Red communist ideology, and traditional Chinese culture continues to play a major role in there despite novel ideas of the West that gradually have been assimilated into the life of Chinese people. Therefore, Beijing provides a suitable setting to study how Western culture interacts with Chinese culture. Western culture and entertainment have played a significant role in strengthening the Western influence in the Beijing community. Young Chinese enjoy watching western films and TV shows, listening to western music, and celebrating western

holidays. Although a majority of Chinese people does not realize how meaningful it is for religious people to celebrate Christmas, they treat it like a Chinese national holiday for they do understand the meanings of giving and receiving as ways of expressing love, affection, and caring.

Last but not least, I chose to conduct research in Beijing because prior to my graduate study at Brigham Young University, I had lived and worked in Beijing for nearly two years. I was familiar with city, which made my travel in Beijing convenient. I was not considered an outsider to Beijing because of my language proficiency in Mandarin and my familiarity with Chinese contemporary and traditional culture. My cultural competence meant that there was no cultural barrier with my respondents during our interviews.

#### *Preparation for Fieldwork*

Before I initiated research in Beijing in late April 2012, I did a substantial literature review on the history of Christianity in China. I learned about what happened to religions during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and how Christianity was revived in the 1980s after China reopened all the religious institutions to the public. However, most of the studies were outdated because they were either done before the Chinese Cultural Revolution or before the Chinese government outlawed Falun Gong in the 1990s. Hence, I needed more up-to-date information to develop my interview guide and make sure it would be relevant and clear to research participants. To address the need for more current information, one month prior to beginning my field research I interviewed ten returned male missionaries at Brigham Young University who had served their missions for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Apart from trying out my interview questions,<sup>3</sup> I also hoped to increase my sensitivity identifying key words, facial expressions, and physical gestures during future interviews. These

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<sup>3</sup> For interview guide please see Appendix A

preliminary participants in my research were extremely helpful. Most had returned from their missions more than two years earlier. While learning about their mission experiences and the challenges they faced, I foresaw potential problems in my field research. I also analyzed my own attitudes toward their mission experiences and responses to them, and was sensitized to the issues and problems of my potential respondents. In order to minimize the omission of important information, I learned to encourage respondents to be more specific by repeating the questions or using alternative questions. Even though this exercise did not directly target the research participants in mainland China, I practiced applying interview protocols and techniques by analyzing my own attitudes toward their responses and sought to eliminate misconceptions to ensure that I did not inappropriately react to respondents' experiences.

In addition to trying out the interview guide, I found rich information about the state-sanctioned Protestant churches in Beijing from internet sources. Every state-sanctioned Protestant church in Beijing has a webpage dedicated to their institution, and I learned about their history. Some of these churches were established in the late 1800s by foreign missionaries, others had been built more recently. The priests and church leaders post information on their websites about class schedules and religious activities as well as articles and essays. By visiting their websites, I could not help but notice that the schedules of classes, reading materials, and the types of religious services and activities differed from church to church. This suggested that the priests and church leaders might have considerable authority in the decision-making that directly affects the activities of their churches even though they are part of the Three-Self Patriotic Churches and under the regulation of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA).

### *Access to Research Sites*

Obviously, this research required much cooperation and assistance from the state-sanctioned Protestant churches and participants. In order to make sure that my research did not violate the Chinese Constitution, first, the Institutional Review Board at Brigham Young University reviewed the research methods and questions in order to ensure that the safety and confidentiality of all research participants were protected and maintained throughout the study. Second, by expressing my respect and consent to the Chinese Constitution, this research was designed to explore the research questions within the government-approved systems of religion. Finally, in order to maintain minimal risk to the researcher and participants, I designed my interview questions to be open-ended with a focus on their religiosity and experiences without focusing on the political and sensitive issues to the Chinese government, such as *Falungong* and Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.

Also, I reviewed my interview questions with several researchers from the Religion Department of the Chinese Academic of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing. This academic institution is different from other public universities in China because its researchers work directly for the Chinese government and their published work represents the Chinese government. Many government decisions on religious regulations derive from their reports and research findings. After they reviewed my interview guide, they agreed that this research had minimal risk for the researcher and the participants. More importantly, they expressed their interest in assisting me by granting me free access to the university. So whenever I had questions or needed their assistance, I could visit them without reservations or security check from the guards at the front gates. They were patient and helpful in answering my questions, but they were also important resources for getting feedback and verifying my research findings.

With the approval of the CASS personnel, I was confident that I could gather the necessary data. In order to make my presence and interviews less invasive to the participants and staff at the research sites (see analysis section for more information on these research sites), I introduced myself and explained my purpose to the people I met at the sites. Throughout this process, I kept field notes on daily observations, interactions, and program functions. By maintaining a consistent presence at these sites, I was able to develop a sense of familiarity with the research sites and program functions. However, it was difficult to develop rapport with the Chinese Christians whose attendance was not consistent at the sites.

To resolve this problem, I turned to my friends for help. In China, personal connection, or *guanxi*, is an important key to expand one's social networks and build effective rapport with strangers. When my friends introduced me to their Christian friends, a mutual and amiable relationship was immediately established. They were not only inclined to accept the invitations for interviews, but they were also more inclined to offer detailed and complete information, which directly influenced the richness and reliability of the data. At the end of our interviews, most of the participants even offered to help identify and locate others to participate in this study. Thus, I used a snowball sampling technique (which involves research participants identifying other potential participants) to recruit Chinese Christians who had relevant experiences.

To complement the information from my interviews, I performed a content analysis of applicable government policies, laws and regulations. However, most of this information was outdated because the relevant documents have not changed for more than 20 years. In addition to collecting field notes at different state-sanctioned Protestant churches and conducting interviews with participants, I created a subset of interview questions directly targeting the government attitudes and opinions toward Christianity and performed semi-structured interviews with four

professors at CASS. Thus, casting a wide net, I was able to gather rich information about the development of Christianity post-Chinese Cultural Revolution and the differences among the churches in my study.

### *Interview Process*

In order to include a cross section of the experiences of Chinese Christians, and thus to more fully understand how Christianity has developed since the Chinese Cultural Revolution, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Chinese Christians of both state-sanctioned and non-state-sanctioned churches. Most of the interviews were conducted individually and privately. Before the interview was voice recorded, the procedures and the purpose of this research were explained to the participants,<sup>4</sup> and participants were required to carefully read the letter of informed consent and express their consent by providing their signatures. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Due to unique circumstances, several interviews were conducted as focus groups. (I will explain this in more detail in the Analysis section).

For the participants, there were no foreseeable risks involved in participation of the project. Names of participants, research locations, and any identifying information were kept confidential at all times, and pseudonyms were assigned for use in the presentation of findings. I also took notes during the interviews to capture non-verbal elements of the interview. Speculations, impressions, ideas, prejudices, and biases were italicized. To further protect the identities of those interviewed, I stored the letter consent forms and the voice recordings separately and saved them on two portable memory drives with password securities. After the interviews and notes were transcribed into text format and coded into major themes, the audiotapes were destroyed, and transcriptions were analyzed using NVivo.

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Appendix B for more information about the research participants.

Setting was a critical factor in conducting in-depth interviews. Two thirds of the interviews took place in coffee shops, McDonalds, or other recreational sites. Only a few interviews were held in people's homes or at other locations more convenient to the participants. A comfortable, safe, and relaxed setting was crucial to the quality of the interviews. When the atmosphere was relatively private but not necessarily quiet, the participants felt more comfortable sharing information about themselves, such as their fears, regrets, relationships, and divorce. For focus group interviews, I was invited to participants' homes, which provided a relaxing environment as we sat around the dining table.

Using a semi-structured interview format ensured that I addressed critical topics through the course of the interview, but it also afforded the flexibility necessary to explore the participants' emerging understanding of the development of Christianity in China and its impact on Chinese society, including how they perceived the relationships between religions and society in contemporary China. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and personal decisions about their experience of becoming Christian.

### *Data and Analysis*

How well the categories relate to the data derives from constant comparison and conceptualization of the data (Glaser 1978). In grounded theory, the analytic process does not produce findings in a specific phase. Instead, "the picture slowly emerged as a patchwork mosaic" (Dey 2004:86). As mentioned earlier, categories and codes were open to change and modification. Through a constant comparison process within the data, plausible stories gradually emerge (Melia 1996).

While using NVivo throughout the coding process, I recorded analytical memos and developed a coding system that organized the data into a logical format that was conducive to further analysis. In the open coding phase I compared concepts that were found in interviews, such as ideas, terms, feelings, attitudes, and so on, labeled, grouped them into a code list, and arranged these categories or themes in a coherent order. This not only helped to better organize new data, but also enabled the integration and identification of upcoming distinct happenings and other instances relevant to the research (Strauss and Corbin 2006). Themes that were generated and developed at the open phase of coding became the core or central categories of this research. They were supported by subthemes or properties in the process of axial coding (Berkowitz and Marsiglio 2007).

In the axial phase of coding, I explored the relationships among concepts and began to construct a theoretical explanation of how Chinese cultural matters<sup>5</sup> to the development of Christianity in contemporary China (LaRossa 2005). At the final stage of selective coding, I also compared the emergent themes in this research study to other scholars' studies of perceptions of Christianity at the individual, social, and institutional levels. My findings disclose the intricacies of social interaction processes and differences in personal interpretations of Christian belief and practice as related to individual and social life in contemporary China (Berkowitz and Marsiglio 2007). For the final qualitative analyses, I compared and contrasted the responses of these participants across a variety of demographic groups or statuses, including marital status, age, social class/income, and education. In doing this, I sought to explore how the impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the development of Christianity in China today varies by demographic characteristics (Neuman 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to Appendix C for more information about the three important Chinese traditional cultures and their impact on Chinese society.

## DATA

After I started field research in Beijing in late April 2012, my field experience widened the scope of potential research subjects regarding the relevant to the development of Christianity in contemporary China. Before I entered the field, I planned to conduct interviews with the Chinese Christians of the state-sanctioned Protestant Churches in Beijing only. I realized it was a serious limitation of the study, but for safety reasons, I thought it better to focus only on the state-sanctioned churches to avoid possible legal troubles and protect the confidentiality of the research participants. As a matter of fact, I was not sure where and how to reach the non-state-sanctioned churches when their information could not be found publicly.

However, after I started investigating the local state-sanctioned churches, I met many Chinese Christians who had attended both house churches and state-sanctioned churches. With their help, I expanded my research focus and included three Christian churches that were not state-sanctioned. In this way I captured a wider range of data, I collecting a comprehensive data at two state-sanctioned Protestant churches and three non-state-sanctioned Christian churches in Beijing.

### *Christian Churches in Beijing*

I conducted my field research at five Christian churches during two trips to Beijing in 2012 and 2013. I spent a considerable amount of time at each of the churches to learn about their histories and their circumstances in Beijing. In Tables 1 and 2, I have provided important information about the five churches and the characteristics of the participants in my study. To maintain the confidentiality of the research subjects, I have given the churches and participants pseudonyms.

During the time spent at each church site, I was troubled by the terms, “state-sanctioned” and “non-state-sanctioned.” The terms did not appropriately reflect their current situations in Beijing. Their circumstances were much more complicated than whether or not they were registered in the Chinese Constitution. For instance, I was troubled by the legal status associated with the Conditional Church in my sample. It was neither a Protestant nor Catholic church, but the government had issued it a temporary venue for its presence in China. Should it be considered as state-sanctioned or non-state-sanctioned? I decided to use the terms “official” and “non-official” churches to better distinguish their affiliations with the Chinese government. Official churches are organized by the state and non-official churches are private and organized by Chinese individuals.

[Figure 1 about here]

The Old Protestant Church (pseudonym) was one of the churches established in the 1900s by foreign missionaries from the Methodist Church. According to information provided by the staff of this church, the foreign missionaries made a great contribution to the city when they first arrived in Beijing. In addition to building this grand church, they also established the first hospitals and professional schools in Beijing. The most well-known university is the Yan Jing University, the oldest theological university in the country. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966 - 1976, Mao’s revolutionaries destroyed the church. Its schools and hospitals were taken away and turned into government operations. After all religious institutions were reopened in the 1980s the Old Protestant Church received funding from the government for remodeling when it agreed to join the Three-Self Patriotic Protestant churches.

Chinese Christians built the second official Protestant church in the 1900s. These Chinese Christians were professors and students of some famous Chinese universities. It became

part of the Three-Self Patriotic Protestant churches under the influence of the May Fourth Movement, a demonstration led by Chinese students participating in an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement. I named it the Young Protestant Church because that church recently moved to a new and modern facility.

These two official Protestant Churches have a lot of in common in addition to their affiliations with the Three-Self Patriotic Protestant churches. They usually have five sessions of religious services each Sunday. At least one of the sessions is conducted in a foreign language by Chinese priests. All of the young priests who work at the Three-Self Patriotic churches are graduates of Yan Jing University. According to their qualifications, they not only have a permanent job working at the Three-Self Patriotic Churches in all corners of China, but they also have opportunities to pursue higher education in theology in foreign countries, completely funded by the Chinese government. Aside from Sunday sessions for religious services, they also teach classes to members during the weekdays. During my field observations at these two official Protestant Churches, I attended several classes that were offered on weekdays. Due to the absence of a membership system, I noticed that most of the pastors or teachers did not have contacts or interactions with church-goers outside the classes. They did not engage in conversations with the attendees during their lessons. After the teachers completed their lessons they would quickly withdraw themselves from the crowds. The learning environment was very much like a typical Chinese academic classroom; there were not many opportunities for teacher-student interaction.

The Protestant churches have strict rules about the qualification for baptism. In order to become true Christians and to have the right to participate in the sacrament, converts are required to take weekly classes for at least a year in order to be considered for baptism. The church

usually offers introductory Bible courses to these converts. After they complete a year of study, potential converts schedule an interview with one of the priests. During these interviews, the converts are tested on many Bible questions in addition to questions about their personal background and spirituality. According to the Chinese Constitution, young people under 18 years of age are not allowed to be baptized into any Christian church, but they can accompany family members to church on Sundays. While the adults attend their Sunday session, the children attend other church classes. However, no classes are offered to young children on weekdays. During my field research at these churches, between one and two thousand people attended each of the Sunday in Chinese language sessions.

I was not able to visit the Conditional Church, the Basement Church, and the Separatist Church without the reference or recommendation of personal connections. Because they are not constitutionally registered religious organizations, I could not find their meeting schedules and locations via public access or on the internet. The Conditional Church is distinct from other churches in this study because it is neither a Protestant nor Catholic. Its presence has been a challenge to the Chinese Constitution because the Chinese Constitution only recognizes Protestantism and Catholicism. Nevertheless, this religious institution somehow has created a space for itself within the state's regulation.

Before it was issued a temporary venue for meeting with its congregation, the Conditional Church was established as a foreign house church that provided religious services only to foreign members of the Church who were working in China in the 1990s. Due to increasing foreign investments in China, the Conditional Church has grown exponentially over the years and has attracted many Chinese citizens. In order to make sure that the Conditional Church could grow in a safe and stable manner, the church leaders have been negotiating with

the government officials and compromising on differences. In the early 2000s, with a government-issued temporary venue, the Church could rent public facilities for conducting religious services, but it had to meet certain conditions. The Chinese members of this church were not allowed to have religious services or religious contacts with foreign members, and so the Chinese members had to have separate services. Furthermore, the church leaders of the Chinese branch could not be nationalities other than Chinese. According to the agreement settled between the Conditional Church and the Chinese government, Chinese citizens investigating the church are allowed to visit it only once. However, this regulation has been relaxed, and during the time of my field research at the site, some people who were interested in attending this church and were seriously considering joining could make more than one visit. In order to become members of the church, however, Chinese citizens must be baptized in Hong Kong. Despite this inconvenience, the waiting period before baptism for Chinese citizens is certainly shorter than in other churches. In contrast, all these regulations for Chinese members do not apply to foreign converts who wish to become members of the Conditional Church. They can simply be baptized in China.

I was first introduced to the Basement Church by a church-goer whom I met at the Old Protestant Church. I called this the Basement Church because they have been meeting in the basement of an apartment complex in a residential area for several years. Although I could not visit it often because its location was remote and its schedule for Sunday worship was always in conflict with other churches in my study, I was able to collect the information I needed.

The organization of the Basement Church was similar to the official Protestant churches, but it had fewer people. In comparison to 1,000 - 2,000 church-goers at each Sunday session at the official Protestant churches, there were about 100 to 150 members who attended this church

regularly during my visits. The basement was spacious enough to seat all the people. They separated into two rooms during the services, and the speakers' talks were projected on a wide screen so that those in the next could also listen and watch. All churches in my study except the Conditional Church used keyboards, drums, and guitars for hymn accompaniments.

I investigated the Separatist Church during my second trip to Beijing in 2013. I learned from a research participant whom I met in 2012 that the Separatist Church was had been a few months prior to my arrival. This church was a branch of the Old Protestant Church at its early stage of development. The Old Protestant Church considered expanding the old place because it could no longer accommodate all attendees on Sundays. Several young preachers proposed to search for a new place for a branch congregation. However, senior pastors and church leaders of the Old Protestant Church revoked the plan. Many members under one of the young pastors' persistence and leadership ignored the decision and went forward with this new plan. Instead of organizing as a branch or sub-church of the Old Protestant Church, they chose a new name for this church. Without the recognition of or affiliation with the Old Protestant Church, the Separatist Church had no financial and legal support from the government. Consequently, they organized as a house church, covering all church expenses with their own money. Many members donated their savings so they could rent a basement at a hotel for their church activities. During my interview with the young preacher of the Separatist Church, I learned that having sufficient funding to pay for church expenses was the main concern to the leaders of the Separatist Church. Therefore, in addition to attending church regularly and participating in weekly activities, members were required to pay tithing. Currently, the young preacher works at both Old Protestant Church and the Separatist Church.

Since religion was reopened in China in the 1980s, the government has funded all the religious affairs of the official Christian churches. Due to the government's generosity that allows those official churches to own properties, most of these officially recognized churches received their cathedrals or chapels back from the state after the end of Chinese Cultural Revolution. Therefore, they did not need to worry about the cost of church daily operations. As a result, these official churches have more advantages and privileges than non-official churches, since they do not have to worry about money, safety, location and teaching materials for their attendees.

[Figure 2 about here]

In addition to the interviews that I conducted with the four professors at CASS, I also conducted 36 semi-structured and focus group interviews that involved 48 Chinese Christians attending these five churches. There were more female Christian participants than male Christian participants; the ratio is 2 female participants to 1 male participant.

Participants that affiliated with the Old Protestant Church, Young Protestant Church, Basement Church, and Separatist Church had much in common. First, all of them had attended more than one church in the past year. They did not have a fixed affiliation to a specific church because membership affiliation was not familiar to them until the Separatist Church had to utilize membership affiliation to secure its expenditures. In other words, the teaching of "tithing" was not emphasized much in general, especially at those official churches. Based on the data collected, there were two reasons for attending different churches: some participants attended other churches because they were introduced by their friends or acquaintances they encountered in church; and other participants attended different churches because they were near to the places they were visiting. Initially I was surprised when they openly shared their experiences with

attending different churches, including house churches, I learned that the participants did not care where they worshipped God. This kind of religious practice is very similar to worship practices in traditional Chinese religions. People who worshipped Buddha, Taoist deities, and Confucius did not mind which specific temple they attended for religious rituals. Second, most of my informants in these churches attended religious services alone even though they were married. I learned that their spouses did not attend church with them either because they were not interested in Christianity, or they were too busy running errands on Sundays.

The Conditional Church was more family-oriented; usually family members attended church services together on Sundays. For example, I saw three generations represented in several families at this church. I conducted more focus group interviews with the members at this church than at other churches.

As shown in Table 2, members of the Separatist Church were younger than research participants from other churches. This is because the young preacher designed church activities and lessons to target young Chinese Christians. During our interview, he said:

You have been to the Old Protestant Church. I am sure you have noticed how many people are there on Sundays. It is flooded; you could hardly know anybody there. People don't have the opportunities to talk and get to know each other during the entire session. ... Now the relationship between people is too distant. We have cellphones and we have internet, but instead of bringing people closer they distance people from one and another. Therefore, only religious places can bring people closer in China today... I want to establish a church in smaller size. This was one of the reasons why we wanted to branch out from the Old Protestant Church... Therefore, the mission of the Separatist Church is to provide a place not only for religious discussions but also for daily socials, so young people could stay away from heavy drinking, gambling, internet addictions, etc. Such friendly and healthy environment can draw them closer to God.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### *Findings on the Five Christian Churches*

To better understand the development of Christianity in China today, my investigation at these five Christian churches in Beijing included examining previous researchers' perceptions

of the development of Christianity. On the one hand, my findings were parallel to Yang's triple-colored religious market and past studies that showed the complexity of the legal status of these Christian churches. Non-official Christian churches in gray or black markets have rapidly emerged in China and have certainly diversified the Christian denominations and complicated the religious system. On the other hand, my findings go beyond Yang's theory concerning the three-colored legal statuses of these religious institutions in China. The religious system is much more complicated than simply constitutional and unconstitutional.

First, I have learned that the boundary or limitation that distinguishes red, black, and gray institutions is not clearly defined. The Chinese Constitution's statements on religion are outdated, making it difficult to use the same criteria to determine the legal statues of the five churches included in my research. Each of these five faces limitations and restrictions from government regulations which make it a challenge to affirm their legal status. For example, it might be assumed that constitutionally recognized religious institutions in China would have more religious freedom and less government restriction than the non-official religious institutions. However, based on my observations at the Old Protestant Church and Young Protestant Church, all their religious activities, teaching materials, and preachers must be approved by State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) before they can be introduced to the public. Their facilities are completely monitored and controlled by surveillance cameras; all conversations and actions are watched and recorded. Although non-official churches do not have surveillance cameras installed in their buildings, they may face random, frequent inspections by the local police. Since the government cannot watch their actions all the time, many non-official church leaders go through interrogations or confiscations of teaching materials (Vala 2012). Among my respondents, two reported in the interviews that they had been interrogated by

policemen. Based on their reports, their experiences with the police were not as dramatic and horrific as mentioned in past studies describing physical punishments and unlawful imprisonment of religious leaders. Ms. Jia (pseudonym) of the Basement Church shared her experience of interrogation:

... A few years ago, I was stopped by two policemen in plain clothes on the street, just a few blocks away from the church (the Basement Church). They stopped me with their badges and asked me if I was leaving from the Basement Church. I said yes. They asked me what I was doing there. I told them I was a Christian so I was participating in a Sunday service. They asked me if the Basement Church was teaching anything inappropriate or propagating information against the Chinese law. I said no. I told them I was a good Chinese citizen and we were only learning stories from the Bible. I pulled out the handout [I received at church earlier that day] and showed it to them. After they read over the handout, they thanked for my time and let me go.

I asked her: “Were you scared?” She shook her head with confidence and continued saying:

...The interrogation happened around the Chinese National holiday [October 1<sup>st</sup> of each year is the Chinese National Holiday]. They weren’t aggressive. I mean they were more concerned with what was going on inside the “church” than me as an individual Christian who is just a layperson. But from then on, I avoided attending any church activities around holidays, especially those holidays associated with the government.

Although this participant did not think her experience was dangerous and intimidating, her comments still implied concern about attending church around Chinese national holidays. She was not afraid of the interrogation, but she was trying to avoid unnecessary complications at sensitive times. This meant she might be a less active church-goer at a particular time.

From this, we can learn some important things about the current relationship that the Basement Church has established with the Chinese government. First, the government certainly knows the exact location of the Basement Church. Second, the government also knows who the organizer of this church is. Finally, its non-affiliation with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement did not seem to affect or endanger its operation in Beijing. It seems appropriate to agree with Vala (2013: 67) that sometimes “religious injunctions supersede policies, rules, and regulations.”

Therefore, I questioned the four professors from CASS about the criteria used to determine the legality of non-official churches and the government's attitudes and plans for their development.

Their individual responses are presented below.

*Professor one* (an expert in Chinese traditional religions): I always disagree with the government's methods interfering with the development of religious institutions. In many ways they are discriminatory toward foreign religions, such as Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. I think all religions should be left alone and develop on their own merits without government's display of favoritism towards Chinese traditional religions. Even though I am a scholar of Chinese traditional religions, I have to be fair and honest about the benefits that foreign religions can contribute to the well-being of Chinese current society. The development of religions in China today has already proven that government's interventions are not effective at all. As matter of that, it has backfired the government's plan. If they stopped intervening, then Christianity probably would not expand this fast. Of course, they never listen to my plan as I was pushing this idea for years before my retirement.

*Professor two* (a Marxist expert): the Chinese government has realized that religion is an indispensable part of Chinese society. The current government has changed; instead of attacking it the government has tried to provide a good environment for religion to develop. Of course, the development of any religion must meet the expectation of the government and society.

*Professor three* (a researcher on Beijing house churches): I am currently working on a research project about all the house churches in Beijing. We have realized that Christian populations are growing rapidly in Beijing. The resources and locations of official churches cannot meet the demands of increasingly growing Christians. Therefore, we are trying to encourage the official churches to cooperate with the house churches in Beijing, so Christians can easily access to those churches without travelling far. We are hoping this project will resolve some burden of the official churches.

*Professor four* (another Marxist expert): This is not a problem can be resolved in a short time. I mean even if the government officially recognizes all religious institutions, it does not necessarily mean that the people will accept them. This might hurt the development of religion in China. This is especially true to those newly arrived religions. Therefore, it is also up to the people. If the presence of this religious institution does not generate conflict or problem with Chinese social and political culture, then it is likely to succeed in China. But of course this takes time to let it develop. Did not the Conditional Church was considered as a cult in the United State before it was recognized as a Christian church? How long did it take to become an accepted church? So you see my point here. China is big. What works in Beijing does not mean it would work in Changsha or other places. Therefore, the role of the [central] government is to provide a general and flexible regulatory framework on religion, which gives enough space for the local governments to decide what are best for their local people.

According to the feedback given by these professors, we can see that the government officials do realize the current regulatory framework for religions lacks maturity or has become inadequate to address the development of Christian churches in China today. However, it remains in a state of limbo by avoiding serious confrontation with the fact of increasing Christian influence in Chinese society. The concerns and unanswered questions about religions that professors mentioned in the interviews suggest that it is important for the government to make a decision about how to regulate the development of religion in general. Their comments reflect the ongoing debate about how the government should respond to the growing religious institutions growth that seems to have slowed the development of solutions for religious regulation and has put the government in an uncomfortable spot. Instead of taking a proactive approach to facilitate, manage, and regulate religious development, the government has become more passive in responding to religious change.

Certainly, the government's reluctance to respond to the rise of Christian churches certainly has not impeded them from spreading. Even though Christians or Chinese people generally, might prefer clarity and authoritative instructions from the government, the outdated regulatory framework may be an important reason why Christianity has developed in such complex ways. Because the Chinese Constitutional provisions on religion are no longer adequate for managing and regulating all kinds of religious institutions in China, my findings show that over the years non-official Christian churches have developed distinct relationships with the Chinese government. (For more information about the types of relationship between non-official Christian churches and the Chinese government, see the section on Christian Churches in Beijing on page 29).

## *The Meaning of Christianity and the Experiences of These Chinese Christians in China*

Clarifying the meaning of Christianity is not only important for understanding what it is to be a Chinese Christian in China today, but also helps us to understand the type and quality of interactions between Christianity and China. Fulton (2012) asserts that, “The strides for the cause of religious freedom have primarily resulted from positive interaction between China’s own people and their government.” This suggests the need to reconsider the relationship between Chinese government and Christian churches. As I have mentioned previously the Chinese government is reluctant to amend or even clarify the necessary regulations to manage the development of religion. By taking an alternative perspective, in other words, understanding the relations between Christianity and the Chinese government from a bottom-up approach, we can begin to see that the increasing religious freedom throughout China actually is the result of the efforts of individual Chinese Christians. To address this issue, I analyzed the interview data obtained from four open-ended questions. These questions concerned research participants’ reasons for their interest and first contacts with Christianity or Christian churches; their religious experiences as marginalized people in China; and the role and meaning of Christianity to Chinese society in the eyes of Chinese Christians.

### *Hardships Draw People Closer to God*

When asked to describe what influenced them to first become interested in Christianity, four respondents indicated that their decisions were partially influenced by relatives to whom they were close when they were young. Mr. Li was a single young man in his early 30s who was a member of the Separatist Church for less than six months at the time of our interview in 2013. He explained:

I was raised by my grandparents in a small village since I was three years old. My parents were working in the city so I could only see them once a year, during every Chinese Spring Festival. I was very close to my grandma because she watched over me at home while grandpa worked in the rice field. My grandma was a Protestant. She took me to church every Sunday. I enjoyed playing with other kids in the village, so I didn't reject the idea of going to church with her. Although I couldn't remember a lot about what was going on at church, I remembered studying scriptures with my grandma at home. Sometimes she needed me to read it for her because she was somewhat illiterate. However, I stopped going to church when I turned 13. That's when my parents took me to the city with them. I started going to church again early this year [2013] when my close friend asked me to accompany him to visit this new church. That's when this church [the Separatist Church] just opened. I liked it here. It somehow reminded me as a little kid and going to church with grandma every Sunday. I think many young people [in China] are in similar situations like me. I mean this is my third year living and working in Beijing alone. Life is hard in such competitive environment. I can get lonely after work [Mr. Li worked at an IT company]. [He laughed]

As the research participants discussed and shared the challenges they faced in their lives, I learned that their problems, such as struggling with health issues and family feuds, and dealing with financial stress and human relations at their work places, are common themes. Although they realized that believing in Christianity would not lighten their burdens, the participants view Christian faith as a way of life that brings happiness, comfort, assurance, love and salvation. For example, Mrs. Huang, who is in her early 40s and whom I met at the Basement Church, has been a Christian for more than five years. During our interview she explained that her life was miserable before she was introduced to Christianity, which has brought her out of depression and self-blame about her father's sudden death in the early 2000s. Even though she did not talk about how her father died, she was emotional as she talked about the well-known book, *Streams in the Desert*, which has been widely read among Chinese Christians and has changed her life. She shed tears as she told me that she was forgiven and she believed that her father was in a better place now. Now, she reads that book every day and she believes she is saved by Jesus Christ.

These responses suggest that hardships, which can be a psychological need for emotional comfort, can influence decisions to join a Christian church and seek God. I have

organized such experiences into four general themes: spiritual support, financial challenges, problematic relationships and divorces, and issues related to death and health. These four general themes also reflect the trials or concerns that different age groups experience in China. For example, a few young Christians in their early 20s, who were studying at prestigious universities in Beijing, compared the Chinese education system with the West. They argued that the current Chinese education failed to satisfy their strong desire for truth. In their view, truth was something that should not be easily defeated or changed to compensate for the ongoing changes in Chinese society. Christianity, as part of the foundation of the Western society, was something they trusted because they believed Christian faith could provide the spiritual and moral support in determining how to live one's life. For them, religion was compared to a rudder that symbolized stability and guidance in life. A good religion would keep them away from having a strong desire for material needs.

The middle-aged (30 to 45 year old) male and female Christians in my study talked about how their lifestyles and desires had been affected by the cruel realities of life. In a patriarchal or male-dominated society, each gender has different responsibilities, Despite all the rights or privileges granted to the Chinese men, they have to face financial burdens and deal with complex social connections and an extremely competitive working environment. Male participants described the pressure, humiliation, and challenges they had to face as they tried to live up to the standards of Chinese society. Not only do they have the responsibilities to take care of their parents, but they also have to be successful enough to start a family of their own. In order to be an eligible bachelor, a stable job is not enough. In fact, according to recent research, "Men who are poor due to unemployment or lack of skills to earn enough money or who are unable to

purchase a new home have difficulty getting married” (Hudson and den Boer 2002; Das Gupta et al. 2010).

Women also suffer in unhappy marriages or relationships under the pressure of these inescapable social responsibilities, and some women have experienced abusive relationships. Although the divorce rate is rising significantly in China today, under the influence of traditional Chinese culture most middle-aged women reject the idea of divorce. Female respondents said that a bad marriage is better than divorce because divorce brings shame to their families and the personal stigma that makes them less desirable for remarriage. Some women interviewees who talked about that their divorce experience indicated that they knew they should leave their husbands, but they lacked the courage to walk away from their relationships, or they were afraid to face the public and family pressure alone. Nevertheless, with the churches’ assistance both spiritually and financially, some women were able to start a new life on their own. Some women who were in unhappy marriages said they had learned to apply the concept of Christian love to repair their marriages, so they could provide a more complete home for their children.

### *Being a Christian in China*

When asked about their lives as Christians, participants compared the quality of their lives before and after their conversions. The young Christians had found keeping the Sabbath day holy a difficult task at the current stage of their lives because they did not want to miss out on social activities with their non-religious friends. Their lifestyles did not change much after they became Christians. On weekends, they usually would get together to play sports, for shopping, dining out, and KTV (a karaoke bar). Participants who were struggling financially found that paying tithing was a challenge, especially for male Christians, like Mr. Li. Because most of them did not grow up in Beijing, they have to create their homes and establish their

personal connections in Beijing from scratch. Besides paying rent, they also have to save up for getting married. According to China Daily USA (Li 2014), comparing the cost of living among 131 cities worldwide Beijing was recently ranked 47<sup>th</sup> on the list. In addition to their own monthly expenses, some participants had to transfer their savings to support their families as well. For that reason, I witnessed many church-goers of the Old Protestant Church who supported the young pastor and followed him to the Separatist Church, but they never expressed an interest in joining the church officially. This was because they did not have to pay tithing at the Old Protestant Church or at other officially sanctioned Christian churches.

In contrast, for members of the older generations, marginalization and discrimination were part of the experience of being Christian in the early 1990s. Most of the older respondents in my research were born in the 1950s and 1960s. They witnessed the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but their memories about it were irrelevant to what happened to religion at the time. Therefore, I did not learn how much about the impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on Christians in Beijing. Nevertheless, during our interviews, all respondents of older generation indicated they experienced some public humiliation at their work place because of their Christian religious beliefs.

I conducted one focus group interview that involved five Christian women of older generations. Comparing them with other participants in my study, I learned that these women were the most active Christians. They were retired and lived near the Old Protestant Church and could devote all their time to serving God. They actively participated in weekly scripture studies and choir practices. When I asked them about how Christianity has challenged and blessed their lives, one woman responded:

I was a worker at a state-owned factory before I retired. That was more than 15 years ago. When people at the factory knew I was a Christian, they would find ways to make fun of

my religious belief. For example, every three months, our factory would rank our workers for our performance and in return, they would reward the top three with bonus. I was ranked the number one according to the numbers of packages I did, but they would give me the lowest bonus for my performance. When I tried to discuss this issue with the leaders, they were humiliating me publicly with foul languages and condemning Jesus Christ. They thought Christians were liars because they didn't believe we were truly friendly, sympathetic, and honest people. They wanted to test me how long I could endure to their mocking until I showed the side of me that they wished to see, but I was praying to God inside and asking Him to make them stop. I couldn't remember how long the ranting lasted; I guess they were running out of words to humiliate me. As time went by, they gradually accepted my Christian identity. The day before my retirement, one of the leaders actually apologized to me about what happened that day and his misbehavior.

The situations for these five women were unique because they were once followers of Mao's leadership and were part of the Revolution as devoted communist members. During our interview as they reflected back about the things they did prior to their conversion to Christianity, they were amazed at how much they had changed. Becoming pious, devoted Christians was never part of their life plan, but something happened that drew them closer to God.

Another woman talked the injustices that she experienced before she became Christian:

Before I knew God, I cared so much about money, wealth, and material goods. I complained how unfair that I did not get a raise when others did. I didn't understand why bad things always happened to me. I mean, look at those beautiful people; they have all the fame and money. On the other hand, look at those people that aren't attractive. They can't get the jobs they deserve simply because they are not pretty enough. Our society is full of injustices. [She laughed really hard] I feel ashamed of myself right now about what I was thinking. Every sentence in the Bible speaks the truth; because of our sins we experience injustice in life. The Bible taught me to worry less about those what I used to value so much, because look at all the animals, they have been taken care of by nature just fine. So God knows our needs. We should focus more on how we can give our hearts to God. With this teaching in mind, my heart suddenly becomes broad-minded. I begin to think less about what I don't have and stop comparing life with others. I am grateful for the blessings that God has given me. Amen!

Comparing the experience of being Christians among respondents of different age groups reveals a transition in the official Chinese stance toward Christians. It is a positive shift, from public humiliation to public recognition. Respondents confirmed that Christians are accepted in many more jobs than before, and which they work in an atheist setting, some said

that their managers actually preferred the employees who were Christians. Some respondents stated that how their religious beliefs had actually helped them to get their jobs, even though they were not as qualified as others. A member of the Basement Church who worked at a pet food company explained, “My boss offered me a job during my internship because he believed Christians are honest and responsible people.” Such standards or attributes pertaining to Chinese Christians have given them a greater responsibility in life. All the respondents expressed their strong desires to be good citizens and to live up to God’s commandments, and most importantly, they strongly believed that they had a mission to complete in this life – to bring others to Christianity or make Christianity known to others.

Christianity is not widely practiced religion in contrast to Buddhism or Taoism. Even so, the Christian image has gradually improved over the years. The government continues to try to keep positive images of Christians from the public. A few participants shared their volunteer experiences representing Christians in Beijing and expressed their frustrations about how unfair the image of Christianity has been. They believe positive images are inadequately publicized in comparison to other religions, especially when Christian churches have been heavily involved in helping and rescuing people in disaster areas. They felt they deserved public recognition not for themselves, but rather, they wanted the publicity and the positive Christian image so that more Chinese people would know what Christianity was all about.

### *Christianity is a Way to Salvation*

The third question for my study relates to the experience of being Christian in China, and the roles that Christianity has played in Chinese society. All respondents, including four professors from CASS, confirmed Christianity’s important role in Chinese society. Although the generalizability of my research findings is limited by sample size, the experiences of my

respondents suggest that the interaction between Christian ideology and Chinese social values produces conflict. For example, in the interviews all participants discussed that they often face financial struggles which eventually lead to difficulties with housing, employment, marriage, and relations with others. These problems are not challenges to Chinese Christians only, but they have become social problems of Chinese society. They seem to be becoming more unbearable, and this has motivated some Chinese people to seek help or comfort in Christianity.

The professors at CASS said that Christianity is important to Chinese society because their research on the social, economic, and political developments of Western countries suggests that Christianity as part of the Western civilization has shaped the social structure of western society. Having examined its benefits, they hope Christianity can bring similar benefits to Chinese society, such as economic growth, social stability, and moral support. Therefore, they did not hesitate to assert that Christianity is an important religion in the development of Chinese society. Importantly, the CASS scholars' perceptions of Christianity are similar to those of government officials. They (perhaps naively) think that if they can just borrow Christian practices from the West, it will have the same effects on Chinese society. This perception of Christianity is influenced by the Chinese Communist ideology. I learned that in order to work at CASS, the scholars have to become members of the Communist Party. As Party cadres, they are strongly discouraged from holding any kind of religious faith. Therefore, they see religious institutions as their competitors under Party influence, so their perceptions of religion differ from those of their counterparts in the West.

On the other hand, the perceptions of Chinese Christians regarding the role of Christianity in Chinese society provide an alternative view, looking at the functions of religion in general. They do not try to measure or evaluate Christian influence scientifically and

economically, but rather they reflect on their past lifestyle, compare it with their current lifestyle, and realize the positive changes that Christian faith has had for the quality of their lives. As they gain more spirituality, they become more aware of their transformations and compare the quality of their lives with others who are non-Christians. For example, they talk about the happiness, gratitude, love, blessings, forgiveness, and support that Christian faith brings into their lives when they stop blaming and complaining about their problems. Most importantly, they find a big difference between Christian practice and Buddhist practice in the exercise of faith. Christians choose to believe in Christianity not for what blessings and wealth they can get from it, but because they are concerned with how they can serve and give back to society. They have a longer perspective on the difficulties and challenges of life.

During my field research, I encountered a few participants who were Buddhists before they converted to Christianity. These respondents put great emphasis on the difference between Buddhist belief and Christian faith. They chose the latter because Christian teaching changed their perceptions about the meaning of life. Mr. Hong was a member of the Separatist Church. His religious transition from Buddhism to Christianity is an example of many Chinese people's misconceptions about the purpose of religion:

When I was 19 years old, I decided to become a Buddhist. I had practiced Buddhism for 14 years. During these years, I experienced ups and downs, such as problems with my business and family. My business went to bankruptcy a few years ago. It was the hardest time in my life. When I lost everything, I didn't know how to face my parents, my wife, my kid, and my friends. I didn't know what I should do. I thought about suicide. That was also when I gave up my Buddhist practice. I didn't want to believe in anything because nothing could save me or help me. I was a devoted Buddhist adherent. I was not like other Buddhist believers who went to the temple a couple of times a year. I read sutras and kowtow (1000 times in 90 minutes) regularly. I was that devoted!

Just 3 years ago, I decided to come to Beijing to search for job opportunities. I have had many jobs, and I am still trying to figure out what I should do. I have an older sister. Last year, she suddenly called me and asked me to go to church. I was annoyed when she talked religion with me. I mean she was not even a Christian at the time. So I argued with her and asked her about the purpose of believing in any religion. I reminded her that I was such a

devoted Buddhist, but it didn't bless me. Religion is useless. My sister insisted and told me that it would at least bring me peace to my heart. So, I decided to give it a try. I went to an official Protestant Church near where I used to live a couple of times, but I found it boring. I always fell asleep, so I stopped going. After I moved to a neighborhood closer to the Old Protestant Church, I pushed myself to go again. The classes for investigators were better organized at the Old Protestant Church. They drew my attention. I liked the friendly and family environment. Even though I was still skeptical about religions, at least my every visit to the Protestant Church brought me peace and I don't know when I started to let go of my past. I went to those classes for investigators and participated in Sunday session for six months without stopping, I finally decided to get baptized in April 2012.

Although I still struggle with my faith sometimes, I feel I am better prepared this time to face whatever is waiting ahead of me. I have learned that religion does not smooth your trials or enrich your life with greater wealth. What I have to experience in this life I have to face it myself, but at least Christianity has helped me to stop being persistent on things that I can't have. I mean I am still searching for opportunities to start my own business so I can bring a better life for my family, but I still haven't found one. It frustrates me sometimes when I become too attached to the idea of becoming successful again, but when I try to seek comfort in the scriptures and actively serve others at church, I can find that peace again.

Although not all Christians that I interviewed had gone through trials as severe as Mr. Hong, they were all struggling with different temptations in life. For instance, many members of the Conditional Church talked about their concerns about working on Sundays. It was easy to find a lot of legitimate excuses to work or do other things than going to church on Sundays. These temptations seemed so insignificant and harmless, but as Mr. Zhou, a successful businessman and a member of the Conditional Church, said, "These excuses would eventually cut off your relationship with God before you realize it. My life was a mess when I chose work and money over God on Sundays. I wasn't happy because of those endless business socials."

As contemporary Chinese society emphasizes house, car, fashion, luxury, and entertainment, the standards of consumption make Christians the minority in this society, staying away from the material goods has been the biggest challenge to the Chinese Christians; it is easy to be caught up with money, things, and fame as they try to work on their *guanxi* or social connections with others to elevate their status in society. The more people you know is said to

bring opportunities and success! Thus, in order to avoid becoming enslaved to these desires for wealth and success, Christian religion has helped them to get through life with a different purpose, to look at life with an eternal perspective. Young single Christians also expressed their strong desire to find spouses who are also Christians. In this way, they could be certain that their marriages would not be built on material goods such as a house, a car, and a good salary only. Instead they believe they would have a happy marriage because they put God ahead of everything.

### *Is Christianity Foreign or not Foreign?*

The fourth question that I asked (“Is Christianity a foreign religion?”) during the interviews about the experience of being Christian in China was an addendum to the original interview topic guides. This question was developed during the analytical process using data I collected during my first field research in 2012. Especially after I finished analyzing the difficulties and challenges experienced by these Chinese Christians, I came to realize that their challenges were not just challenges for Christians in China. Rather, they were problems for ordinary Chinese as well. My Christian respondents said they had been blessed by the knowledge and comfort they receive from Christian religion. They felt strongly that Christianity was not a foreign religion even though it was originally from the West. The young preacher of the Separatist Church was insightful about why Christianity should no longer be seen as a foreign in China. He explained:

...It is not a foreign religion to China. At least we shouldn't treat it this way anymore. Christianity has been developing in China for several decades, it has been “Chinanized” and “localized” in many ways. It is Chinese Christianity. We only establish rapport relationship with other churches outside of China, but we don't have any religious ties with them. We are not under anyone's leadership or affiliated to any international Christian church. There is no controlling or guidance from outside sources. God is universal, right? Any country has the right to become the nation and people of God. You have to realize that people [both Christians and investigators] come to Church today have no clue of what

happened to religion during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, especially, the Christians today in Chinese urban areas. The research team from CASS recently did a survey of Chinese Christians. At this moment, we have more than 230 million Christians in China and 80% of the Christians joined the church in the late 1990s or even five to ten years ago. So they really don't know what our older generations experienced at that time [Chinese Cultural Revolution].

Maybe history has been forgotten among the young generation in China, but it is evident that the development of Christianity has deep roots in Chinese society today. On the other hand, although it is asserted to be a religion of China, the monotheistic practice and the familiar names in the Bible continue to be foreign to some Chinese.

In addition, the growing impact that Christianity has on Chinese society in both Chinese urban and rural areas does create tensions with other traditional Chinese religions. For example, the young pastor of the Separatist Church said that the project of building an official Protestant Church in Qufu, Shandong Province was delayed due to the discontent of the local community, and the government eventually terminated this project. Qufu is the hometown of Confucius. Throughout Chinese history, many temples and historical sites were dedicated to honor Confucius in Qufu. It has been the home to Buddhist and Taoist religions. Traditional Chinese cultural influence was very strong there. According to the young preacher, although the local people could not explain exactly why they disliked the idea of building a Christian church in their town, they simply did not need Christianity when they argued that they have Confucius and traditional Chinese temples. They already had Confucius, teachings of China and part of Chinese cultural legacy.

Another interesting dilemma discussed by the young preacher was in recent years, many traditionalists and scholars expressed their concern about the loss of Chinese costumes and traditional cultures, because they felt the Chinese national holidays have been less celebrated among Chinese people due to Western cultural influence. Many Chinese people celebrate

Christmas and Valentines' Day more frequently than Chinese traditional holidays. The young preacher said, "I just hate sitting through those endless discussions about why the government should preserve traditional Chinese religions, but I had to be there to represent the Christian voice." According to the young pastor, a few years ago five professors from several renowned Chinese universities organized a movement calling for the revival of traditional Chinese culture. They prepared a list of traditional Chinese holidays that should be considered as Chinese public holidays; fifty of their colleagues around the country signed the proposal and delivered it to the Chinese central government. They felt that Christmas was far more celebrated in China today than traditional Chinese holidays, which imposed a threat to preserving Chinese cultural heritage. Therefore, the government of People's Republic of China made some adjustments in 2006 and listed the Dragon Boat Festival, Tomb Sweeping Day, and Mid-Autumn Festival as part of traditional cultural heritage to China and they have been celebrated as Chinese public holidays since 2008.

The Chinese are divided about whether Christianity is a foreign religion. In comparison to Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, it is still substantial, fairly young, but based on my experience and data, its impact is perhaps greater than that of traditional Chinese religions. Accordingly, the tension between Christianity and the traditional religions can be intense at times. Some Chinese traditional scholars even intend to minimize or even remove Christian images in public, such as promoting the idea of celebrating more Chinese traditional holidays to minimize the influence of western culture. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the tension is not about traditionalists' prejudice against Christianity, but rather, reflects the general misconception of the people about what is religion and what is culture. Preserving Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism as part of Chinese cultural heritage is similar to conserving artifacts in a museum.

They are valuable but detached from the evolving world. However, the engagement of Christianity in Chinese society influences every aspect of the Chinese Christian's life. Christian teachings and Christian influence become one of the cultural elements that compete in shaping and reshaping the cultural and social landscape of Chinese society. This is illustrated by the respondents' reference to Christianity as a shield that protects them from the social status concerns promoted by Chinese mainstream society. Christianity acts as an oppositional force that confronts the values of Chinese society and creates a continuing fruitful interaction between Christianity and Chinese culture. To understand and interpret this productive tension I shall apply the concept of Yin-Yang interaction.

The concept of Yin-Yang interactions allows us to not only understand how the mixture of cultural and religious practices affect relations between religion and Chinese state government, but it also offers an interpretation of the development of Christianity in China today. Christianity in China is affected by the dynamic of state government-religion interaction. These processes change the structure of Christian religion as it adjusts to the current cultural or political climate and, at the same time, they reshape the aspects of Chinese society to make room for Christianity.

*The Interaction between Christianity and Chinese Culture, Traditional and Contemporary*

This question boils down to whether Jesus and Dragon can coexist in China today. My findings suggest that they can coexist. However, the relationship between Christianity and the Chinese government varies across time, location, and political climate. The Chinese government may seek to suppress the increasing influence of Christianity on Chinese society, but Christianity seems to find ways to surpass restrictions and become continually more engaged Chinese society.

Its influence may seem small in comparison to the domination of state regulation, but it seems to have become a significant element of Chinese culture.

It is important to remember that the changes occur in both directions. The interaction of Christianity and government regulation is like the two great forces, yin and yang, in Taoist philosophy. They do not win or lose as they interact, but instead, are gradually brought together, give and take, to coexist in harmonious relationships. Therefore, before I discuss the development of Christianity as influenced by the interaction of Christianity and Chinese culture, I will describe Yin and Yang and how the concept of Yin-Yang interaction is relevant to religious change in contemporary China.

### *Yin and Yang*

Taoist philosophy perceives the world as “holistic, dynamic, and dialectical” (Fang 2011:31; Chen 2002; Li 1998 and 2008; Peng and Nisbett 1999). Chinese culture and society have been influenced by the combination of Chinese indigenous beliefs and the “three teachings” of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Bell 1989). Throughout Chinese history, the Chinese setting for religion has always been a pluralistic and polytheistic environment, involving multiple deities and religious philosophies in a context of varying government acceptance, rejection, or persecution.

Taoist scholars recognize the universality of the Yin-Yang concept in understanding the world around us: “it has influenced Chinese philosophies, martial arts, medicine, science, literature, politics, daily behavior, religious beliefs, thinking, and other fields for thousands of years” (Fang, 2011:33). Scholars emphasize that Yin-Yang thinking is more than simply a part of Chinese culture. In fact, these oppositions are directly reflected in the impact of two of the most influential traditional Chinese philosophies (Confucianism and Taoism) on traditional Chinese

life and the social structure. Fritjof points out, “Confucianism was rational, masculine, active and dominating. Taoism, on the other hand, emphasized all that was intuitive, feminine, mystical, and yielding” (1975:130). The notion of a division of labor between Confucianism and Taoism to achieve harmony and transcendence in Chinese society has been influenced by the concept of the Yin-Yang interaction. In order to bring all relationships into existence, both Yin and Yang elements must be present. Confucianism, under the influence of Yang, has given shape to Chinese political and social structure by playing a prominent and hegemonic role in Chinese society throughout the years. In order to be able to respond and interact with the Yang-dominated Chinese political atmosphere, the rest of the social institutions, including religion, have adopted Yin characters.

Taoist teaching of Yin-Yang posits that all phenomena and all relationships come naturally in pairs of opposites, such as heaven and earth, day and night, joy and dejection, winter and summer, male and female, movement and stasis. These are opposite-but-complementary because nothing is dominated entirely by Yin or Yang. Rather, these two opposing forces both are present within phenomena, making interaction with other phenomena possible. However, the amount of Yin and Yang that phenomena carry IS related to the types of roles, relationships, and interaction that they have with others in the universe. Moreover, the Yin-Yang elements within a phenomenon are gradually transformed and shifted through interaction over time. When a predominant-Yin phenomenon interacts with a predominant-Yang phenomenon, their interaction will bring out or strengthen the embedded Yang within the predominant-Yin and enervate the predominant-Yang of another phenomenon to cultivate its hidden Yin (Olson 2011; Billington 1997; Fritjof 1975). A simple example of Yin-Yang interaction is the phenomenon of changing temperatures throughout the day and night, which brings significant seasonal changes throughout

the year. In Taoist perspective no phenomenon is static or exists without being interrelated and interdependent to each other (Fowler and Fowler 2008; Fang 1980; Moeller 2006; Cooper 2010).

### *The Yin*

Yin is often represented in the black portion of the circle, and it is less prominent compared to Yang. In Chinese culture, “Yin is everything that is esoteric” (Fowler and Fowler, 2008:50). The feminine essence is usually associated with Yin because of her gentleness, beauty, docility, submissiveness, and fragility. However, Yin does not represent weakness; it is simply another form of strength, which endures and remains steadfast to the counteractive force of Yang (Fowler and Folwer 2008). The eighteenth-century Taoist Liu Yiming described the characteristics of Yin in terms of a person, an explanation that is appropriate in defining the role and status of religion in China:

Flexibility is docility, yielding, self-mastery, self-restraint, self-effacement, humility, selflessness, consideration of others, absence of arbitrariness, pure simplicity, genuineness. Those who use flexibility well appear to lack what they are in fact endowed with, appear to be empty when they are in fact fulfilled. They do not take revenge when offended. They seek spiritual riches and are aloof of mundane riches; they do not contend with people of the world (Fowler and Fowler, 2008:50).

These characteristics of Yin are applicable to the nature and the development of Christianity in China, especially to those religious organizations that are non-affiliated with the official Christian churches. These religious organizations have to utilize the Yin-elements to organize stealthily and flexibly in accordance with the often-changing government policies.

The nature of Yin has equipped Christianity with flexible, yielding, esoteric, and persistent characteristics for dealing with the preemptory and aggressive Chinese state culture. For instance, even though the Separatist Church was not approved by the Old Protestant Church, it has been registered as a company and has been organizing discreetly in the basement of a hotel. Persistence, another characteristic of Yin, taught Christianity to be submissive in times of crisis

and solidary when faced with state suppression. According to the young pastor of the Separatist Church, there were a few times their basement church group was investigated and warned by the policemen. They were accused of illegal gathering for religious activities and they had been forced to take down the cross from the wall. Now, they take down the cross every time they finish Sunday services to avoid troubles during unexpected future inspections.

The nature of Yin does not encourage Christian churches to confront the Chinese state authority in a hard and rigid manner. One of the famous Chinese proverbs stems from the Yin-Yang interaction, 以柔克刚 (*yi rou ke gang*), which means to implement softness and flexibility to counterbalance its oppositional forces, such as durability and firmness. This proverb is usually associated with one of Chinese Kong Fu styles, utilizing “soft” power to fight against the adamant or “hard” power. Doing so not only will result in less injury to oneself but will also outstrip one’s opponent’s hard power by taking the lead. If we apply this concept to the role and the status of the Christian churches in my study, we find similar results regarding their legal statuses. It has taken nearly 15 years for the Conditional Church to receive a temporary venue for rightfully conducting religious services in public.

### *The Yang*

In contrast to Yin, Taoism defines Yang as powerful and as radiant as the sun. It portrays the characteristics of masculinity and denotes energy and vitality of life. “It is aggressive, hard, heat, dryness, the bone of the body, the hard, dry stone of the home, the south, sunny side of a valley or river bank, and the spring and summer time of the year” (Fowler and Fowler 2008:50). Most importantly, Yin and Yang together form a great pair; without them we cannot know what goodness is; it takes its meaning in opposition to evil.

Historically, the Chinese state has been influenced by both Confucian and Western thinking. According to Max Weber and other scholars, the structure and organization of ancient Chinese society reflected the influence of Confucianism. Confucianism was the most popular philosophy because it “has a long tradition of involvement in political construction” (Pomeranz 2009:271), and Confucian thought persisted for many centuries. The present Chinese state culture has inherited the Yang-principles in regulating and governing the Chinese society.

In contrast, in Taoist teaching, the government regulations, policies, and restrictions can be impediments to the Yin-Yang interactions between Christianity and the Chinese state authority and directly hinder the proper development of Christian churches in Chinese society, because the government’s regulations and intrusions oppose routines or orders that are established by Nature. In other words, without the artificial intervention of the government, religion may develop in a healthy and natural way in Chinese society. Some Taoist adherents even argue that the government’s excessive control often brings destruction and negative impacts rather than positive results. In this perspective, the government’s relationship to the Christian churches in China is imbalanced and underdeveloped at the national level due to the unjust interaction between religion’s Yin and the Chinese authority’s Yang. In order to achieve balance and harmony, the interaction between Yin and Yang must take place in accordance with the “Tao,” without manipulation. The balance is the result of the occurrence of cyclical and never-ending motions of transforming Yin from Yang and Yang from Yin.

To maintain and perpetuate that balance neither of the Two Great Forces can dominate for an extended period of time (Ebrey 1993). In fact, the natural balance or harmony is governed by the natural course of “Tao” which can be achieved by the idea of *Wuwei* (无为) or “non-acting.” *Wuwei* is “a kind of action that does not force things against their nature and is thus in

accordance with the Dao” (Gentz, 2013:79). When people stop imposing their desires and expectations on others, things develop in a spontaneous manner or *Ziran* (自然) which is propitious for the growth and transcendence of all phenomena (Moeller, 1893). The destruction of *Ziran* means that the balance between Yin and Yang is drastically destroyed or distorted which unleashes unrestrained amounts of Yang that cannot be counterbalanced by the impact of Yin, resulting in self-destruction.

### *The Yin-Yang Interaction*

The concept of Yin-yang interaction helps us understand how Christianity has developed in China over the years. Instead of looking at its development from a top-bottom perspective, which suggests that Christianity is inferior and subject to Chinese government rulings due to the indelible impressions left by the impact of Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 60s, the Yin-Yang perspective suggests a different interpretation. In its view, individual Christian churches that are non-officially sanctioned have gradually obtained more religious rights, legal statuses, persistence, and power in Chinese society. Moreover, the Yin-Yang interaction not only draws Christianity and the Chinese authority closer to form a symbiotic relationship, but their interaction also encourages Christian to transcendence in Chinese society by increasing its impact on society and its size at the Chinese community level.

As mentioned earlier, “all universal phenomena are shaped by the integration of two opposite cosmic energies, namely Yin and Yang” (Fang 2011:31). Although Yin and Yang are two opposite energies or forces, they are not designed to destroy or eliminate each other. Instead, they complement and reinforce each other by giving rise to their opposing forces that are hidden within their interaction. Ji, Nisbett, and Su (2001:451) described the codependency between Yin and Yang, as quoted by Fang: “When yin reaches its extreme, it becomes yang; when yang

reaches its extreme, it becomes yin. The pure yin is hidden in yang, and the pure yang is hidden in yin” (2011: 34). As a result, all phenomena must incorporate interdependent relationships, allowing their inherited Yin-Yang elements to be mutually dependent. As Fang explained:

Yin and yang cannot survive without each other; they do not only complement each other, but they also depend on each other, exist in each other, give birth to each other, and succeed each other at different points in time. Yin and Yang, water and fire, the moon and the sun, and so forth, are waning and waxing, coming and going, opening and closing, all in the process of ceaseless change and transformation (2006:77).

In Taoist teaching, the interactions between Yin-Yang forces, theoretically speaking, are “equally” powerful and insignificant. All that exists should manifest an equal weight of importance and insignificance.

However, maintaining harmonious relationships among all phenomena is a challenge, because nothing is entirely natural and free from human intervention. All phenomena need to be in accordance with the natural course of “Tao” and constantly go through conversion and face changes, and their inherited Yin-Yang elements can be disturbed and become imbalanced through humans desires and interventions. Therefore, the outcomes of all existences and the consequences of relationships do not occur in a “situation-free, context-free, or time-free construct” (Fang 2011).

### *The Soft Power of Yin within Religion*

As a result of limited social resources and rigorously enforced Chinese policies on religions in general, religious institutions including Christian churches that are non-official have used the soft power of Yin to their advantage in their interaction with Chinese authorities. The soft approach associated with Yin protects them from government harassment and assists their surreptitious development while counterbalancing the strong Yang of government authority. It also encourages them to develop and organize creatively and diversely. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has attacked the growing numbers of underground Christian churches. In

response to this suppression and rejection, these religious organizations have remained silent and unnoticed, creating a front of compliance. Nevertheless, if we examine the development of Christianity closely, we find that not only has Christianity become the fastest growing religion in China (Wenger 2004; Yang 2004; Vala 2012), but it has also become the most diverse religious denomination. It is ironic that in an era of religious restriction and limitation, China has become a country with a great diversity of religious belief and organization. One cannot help but wonder what has allowed religious institutions to expand so rapidly under such repressive conditions.

My research findings are aligned with a cultural view based on the Taoist perspective regarding the development of Christianity in China today; the colored market to which a religion belongs does not entirely affect the development of that religious organization in society. In fact, successful growth of a religious institution is contingent on the effectiveness of its Yin in countervailing the oppression of Yang. For instance, the common shared traits among “non-official” Christian churches relate to the flexibility and submissiveness of Yin. If these churches can fully utilize the soft power they inherit, then they can resist the preemptory control of the Chinese state cult. The flexibility of Yin helps these churches to relocate their meeting locations and reorganize their members into smaller units when facing the threat of government invasion and inspection. In addition, the submissiveness of Yin allows Christian churches to survive.

The notion of perpetuation for religion in China is more than simply abiding by the Chinese Constitution and submitting to the control of state authority. Instead, it acts as a mask that strengthens and consolidates the power and existence of religion in Chinese society without confronting the Yang of the Chinese authority directly. If Christianity or any other religion engages in direct confrontation with the Chinese state culture, in Taoist teaching it is considered a foolish act. Direct confrontation denotes the failure of Yin-Yang interaction.

In other words, when two positive or negatively charged magnets face each other, instead of attracting each other, they push away from each other. Similarly, a confrontational Yang-Yang interaction brings injuries and destruction. In such confrontations, individual Christian churches often experience immediate setbacks. That is also why some Christian churches have received harsher treatment than others. Moreover, the Yin-yang perspective makes a strong argument about why some churches have developed a more intimate relationship with the state culture than others.

*From “Underground” Churches to “House” Churches*

My research suggests that the expansion of Christianity in China over the past thirty years represents a success story about the interaction between the Yin of religion and the Yang of the Chinese government despite the difficulties that Christian churches have experienced. After the resurgence of religion in the early 1980s, some Christian churches hoped to avoid unexpected suppression, so they kept their ties with the official churches. Others soon dissociated themselves from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association to establish their own units. Their decisions to break away from the official religions implicitly expressed their disapproval of government’s infringement on religious practices and beliefs. The Chinese government was worried that their break-away might result in rekindled relationships with foreign churches for support. Consequently, the Chinese government appointed SARA in the 1990s to regulate and control the printing and distribution of religious materials and to attack these atomized religious groups by invading their meeting places and arresting their religious leaders.

These “intractable” Christian churches were stigmatized as the “underground” churches. They were publicized as evil cults that threatened Chinese people’s lives (Madsen 1991; Vala

2012). Due to the government's publicity in the early 1990s, the general public approached these churches with ambivalence and caution. Nevertheless, people's perception of the underground churches began to change when a wave of foreign religions flooded into China during the 1990s. They were organized in small groups at first because they were originally organized by foreigners who were working and doing business in China. They held their meetings in people's homes. These foreign religious groups were new to China and even though some were Christian denominations, their religious practices and beliefs did not appear compatible with the state-sanctioned Protestantism and Catholicism. Therefore, as outliers they challenged the government's regulations on religion and pressed for reforms. Over the years, their existence as "house churches" began to distinguish them from the stigma of "underground" churches.

The term "underground church" continues to hold negative connotations and is usually associated with "evil cults" or "malpractices." In contrast, the "house" churches began to be viewed as small, state-allowed churches. The growing popularity of new religious groups and foreign churches gradually altered the Chinese government's perception of the non-state sanctioned religions. The strong Yang of the Chinese state cult was worn down and the changing perceptions of "house" churches by the Chinese government eventually allowed some churches to become semi-official churches. For example, the Conditional Church was transformed from a house church to a semi-official church with the temporary venue issued by the Chinese government.

The increasing diversity among religious organizations in China today suggests that the soft power of Yin has successfully facilitated growth and protection from the Chinese government's often changing policies on religion. It also affirms that Yin is indeed a powerful

force which has diminished the strong Yang of the Chinese state cult without raising its perceptions of danger.

### *Government's Interventions Draw People Closer to Christianity*

Taoist philosophy focuses on eternity and spontaneity. It is an optimistic, promising philosophy in a way that gives hope and introduces novel solutions to allow Christianity to develop in China under the heavy government regulations and control. For instance, the escalation of divorce rates resulted in infidelity. “According to a survey by Tsinghua University and lifestyle magazine Xiaokang, a total of 2.87 million marriages ended in divorce in 2012, which is a 7.65 percent increase from the previous year” (FlorCruz 2013). Many studies have revealed that infidelity is the reason for couples’ separations in China today (FlorCruz 2013; He 2013). Even though the increasing divorce rates cannot be directly associated with the lack of religious context for most Chinese marriages, there is trend toward marriage in churches, even among the nonaffiliated (Li 2012). Getting married at cathedrals or churches has not only become a popular trend among Chinese young couples who still see light and hope in marriage, but it is also an extremely effective mechanism to strengthen the influence of religion and among young couples and their friends and relatives. This trend has helped Christianity to gain greater recognition and support among the Chinese public.

During the interviews, all the respondents talked about their financial challenges and how they overcome these obstacles with the help of Christian faith and beliefs. People of different age groups, different social and economic backgrounds, and different genders have different challenges in their lives. Usually, the older generation (people who were 50 and older) worried about whether their retirement pensions would be sufficient to support their living in Beijing, and they were afraid their medical expenses would be a burden to their families and their children.

Additionally, they want to save up enough money to help their children to buy a car or an apartment before their marriage. Owning a car and/or an apartment is part of Chinese tradition that is still prevalent today. The bride's family expects that these preparations by the groom's family when he marries. However, as the cost of real estate has skyrocketed in China, this tradition not only has become a burden to the males' families but also imposes tremendous pressure on the young men in Chinese society. Many put off their marriage to the mid-thirties, and many, like those I met during my interviews, chose to leave their hometowns to earn higher income in Chinese cities, like Beijing.

According to PEW Research Center's recent study of current issues facing China, the growing income gap between rich and poor, and increasing corruption that biases job opportunities, imperil the government's credibility. Such issues signal an ethical decline and a growing spiritual vacuum among the Chinese people (Poushter 2013). In an effort to resolve these issues and restore stability and harmony in their lives, many people have sought spiritual nourishment, turning to church and church members for help and comfort while dealing with the frustrations generated by their daily activities. For example, in my interviews two men said they enjoyed participating in church activities because they could not share work related problems and pressures with their parents because that would worry them. Nor could they share these concerns with their co-workers or supervisors in their companies because they were afraid their comments and complaints would hurt their social networks and destroy their work relationships with others, since "guanxi" (personal connection/social ties) is a key element to success and promotion in Chinese society. However, they were free to talk in church meetings where "brothers" and "sisters" could gather and view their problems and concerns through a religious lens. They were simultaneously learning and applying Christian teachings in their daily activities.

For such young people, church is more than a place for religious worship. They also see it as a safe haven to relieve the pressures of secular life and regenerate their spirits.

Chinese people who seek spiritual growth buttress the existence of Christianity without violating the Article 36, the Freedom of Religion, which was adopted on December 4, 1982 in the Chinese Constitution. It is not only a trend that reflects the impact of the soft power of Yin in religion, but it also proves how the strong Yang of Chinese authority has been smoothed and polished through their Yin-Yang interaction (Yang 2012). According to Li's interview with Fan Guoxing, a preacher at Haidian District Church in Beijing in the China Daily, the Chinese government relaxed its religious regulation in 2008, two years after Hu's call for building a "Harmonious Society," so that pastors could hold religious wedding ceremonies for nonbelievers. Preacher Fan said he officiates at about 40 weddings a year, half of them for nonbelievers (Li 2012).

The increased support Christianity has received in Chinese society does not conflict with the Chinese political agenda in building the "Harmonious Society." However, the government perceives the rapid growth of Christianity, a foreign religion, as a threat to its political stability. In order to counteract the growth of Christian faith without attacking Christianity directly, the government argues that since traditional Chinese religions have always been interrelated with the traditional Chinese culture and part of the Chinese cultural heritage, the government is obligated to provide extra support and approval to enhance the stature of traditional Chinese religions - Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism - in order to preserve them (Lim, 2010). As a result, local governments have been actively working with local temples and shrines, providing funding and lands for remodeling existing temples and constructing new ones. According to the Xinhua News, the number of official Taoist temples doubled to 3,000 in the 14 years from 1995 to 2009 (Wei

2009). The increasing numbers of Buddhist and Taoist temples have boosted China's tourist economy and also fostered selective Chinese folklore religions, such as Mazu worship.

Mazu worship is a popular folklore religion in southern China and Taiwan. The Chinese government built a gigantic Mazu temple with excessive gold in Mazu's hometown, Meizhou Island, Fujian Province to accomplish two main purposes. First, constructing Mazu temples was a way for the government to express its support for preserving traditional Chinese culture, and to change people's early view of the Communist Party as an enemy to Chinese folklore religions. Secondly, the government hoped that building a Mazu temple in Mazu's hometown would attract tourists from Taiwan, which could strengthen China's political relationship with Taiwan (Lim, 2010).

Although the government's intervention has helped to spread the influence of traditional Chinese religions in contemporary China, most of the positive impact of its involvement has been to preserve them as part of Chinese cultural heritage rather than as religious organizations. For example, the Confucian Peace Award in 2011 was invented by the Chinese government to express its objection to the Nobel Prize committee's decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize of 2011 to Liu Xiaobo. Liu was a Chinese pro-democracy activist who had been sentenced in December, 2009 to prison for 11 years for writing and publishing subversive materials (Metz, 2010). It was not a surprise that the Chinese government would respond quickly to Oslo's decision, but what was shocking to the Chinese people and the rest was the government's decision to revive Confucian teachings as part of Chinese cultural heritage by placing a colossal statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square. Mao had condemned and disapproved of Confucius and his teachings for the lasting effects of feudal practice on the people. Among the many things that attacked by the Red Guards were Confucius' teachings and all texts, temples, sties, and

statues associated with Confucius. The revival of Confucius, his statue standing at the north gate of the newly renovated National Museum of China on the east side of the Tiananmen Square, almost facing Mao's portrait, was confusing to the Chinese public. The people began to question the Party's commitment to "all that Mao had stood – and fought – for" (Gardner 2011).

during my interviews, respondents criticized the close relationship the traditional Chinese religions now have with the Chinese government. They are uncomfortable with the idea that these traditional religions are affiliated with and financially supported by the government. The people question the state's devotion to the temples and other sacred sites, especially when money is heavily involved. Fees are charged at the entrance gates and for worship at these sites. As a result, these sites have become less sacred and attract many tourists. It also seems that the money people are willing to pay to worship the traditional Chinese deities now denotes religious devotion.

According to the Want China Times, Buddhist temples in China are run as for-profit businesses and many religious leaders in these temples have turned faith, and their callings as monks and nuns, into attractive occupations for many graduates with advanced degrees. These monks are known as "professional monks" (职业和尚) and they are being paid more than white-collar workers in China (2013). Although the development of Buddhism was not part of my research, respondents mentioned aspects of Buddhist religion and religious practice during my interviews. Buddhism continues to be a widely practiced religion throughout China and some of the respondents said that Buddhism was a popular religion because it was intricately intertwined with traditional Chinese culture and Chinese ways of living.

Some respondents had been Buddhist devotees before they converted to Christianity. They compared Buddhist practice and Christian faith and said they chose the latter because they

realized that the knowledge they could gain from Buddhism was difficult and minimal. They said the Bible was easy to read, they preferred the structure and commandments from God explicitly written there, and they accepted monotheistic practice. In their eyes, Buddhists were idol worshippers who blindly following the traditional practices without truly understanding the purpose and the meaning of life. Some respondents argued that the profession of “monk” had altered the traditional Buddhist practice of celibacy and abstention from eating meat. These changes have not brought positive recognition to Buddhism, but rather shame and skepticism. Thus, government efforts to buttress traditional Chinese religions have eroded the essence of religion – faith, devotion, and endurance – by fostering irregular and unjust growth to impede and forestall the development of Christianity. They have also created a negative or setback effect on the development of Buddhism and Taoism in contrast to the continuing growth of Christianity.

Some Chinese people seeking spiritual enlightenment have found Christianity to be more reliable than the traditional religions. My respondents reported that preachers of the private churches can be depended upon because their service to God is not money driven, but rather an expression of their devotion. Believing in Christianity is also less expensive than devoting oneself to the traditional Chinese religions, for there is no fee charged each time one enters the cathedrals or churches. Furthermore, Christianity has become more accessible religion than the other religions due to the growing numbers of the house churches in Chinese residential areas (小区). There is no need to travel far from one’s home to be spiritually fed. Thus, for many, Christianity has become a preferred alternative religion.

## CONCLUSION

During the 1960s, the Chinese government attempted to remove religion and traditional cultural values from China by stressing communist and socialist ideologies. This attempt kept all

religious activities and their organizations in a state of dormancy for a decade, until the five official, registered religious institutions were restored in the 1980s. Since then, religion, especially Christianity, has been growing rapidly in China (Madsen 1991, 2013). Christian churches have become diverse not only in their organizational structures but also as the number of distinct denominations in China has increased.

Yet the religious revival and the vast expansion of Christianity throughout Chinese society, have not reformed China's constitutional framework on religious regulations to reform in the way we might expect. Since adopting the Constitution on religion in 1982, China has made no amendments to correspond to changes in religious practice and culture within the country. Yet the growing role of Christianity in Chinese cities has brought changes in the government's perception of Christianity: while it is a foreign religion, after its separation from its foreign ties, Christianity can be "*chinanized*" through the process of inculcating Christian teachings into Chinese culture. I have discovered that the Christian organizational structures are far more complicated than what we already know from the literature, and those complexities are mostly influenced by the churches' relationship with the Chinese government.

State-organized Christian churches usually have a permanent location for their religious congregations, like the Old Protestant and Young Protestant Churches. These state-registered churches need not worry about finances or membership attendance. The state government funds their religious activities and the state government officially recognizes them, so they are more easily accessible to Chinese church-goers than churches that are not state-registered. In addition, these churches offer multiple worship sessions, facilitating attendance for members who must work or run errands on Sundays.

Despite these advantages, not all the Chinese Christians prefer the large congregational setting. Some like small, private settings. Both my observations and the interviews suggest that the non-state-registered churches offer many benefits. They are organized in small, private locations, in hotels, residential areas, or business buildings. Their small gatherings are intimate and people come to know each other fairly well. Compared to the official church, members and church leaders have more opportunities to interact and chat with each other before and after the religious ceremonies. They are more like families. Their sermons and teachings also are more varied and flexible since their materials do not need prior-approval from the government. Sometimes they invite their members to speak on specific religious topics and they may invite church leaders from Taiwan or Hong Kong to speak. Such experience is impossible at the state-registered churches. As a consequence, the house churches or non-state-registered churches are expanding significantly in Chinese cities. Although it is unknown how many non-state-registered churches are in Beijing, according to one of the professors at CASS, there are enough non-state-registered churches in the residential areas that people no longer have to travel far to attend religious gatherings. The government gradually has had to accept the reality of an increasing number of non-state-registered churches in Beijing. Sometimes they even encourage these churches to register and, in return, some churches like the Conditional Church are given an official temporary venue for religious gathering.

Church attendance is not required in the state-registered churches, nor in many non-state-registered churches. My own research revealed that only two non-state-registered churches that recorded members' church attendance. Recording Church attendance is not commonly practiced in China, because Chinese Christians are so mobile. All of my respondents except those in the Conditional Church have all attended both state- and non-state-registered churches.

It seems that Chinese Christians' different spiritual and emotional needs have diversified Christian denominations. In the late 1980s and 1990s, many churches decided to break their ties with the Three-Self Patriotic Church. Now the growth of non-state-registered churches is largely caused by the need for relief from the social pressures of living in Chinese cities. For example, the Separatist Church is specifically organized to fit the needs of the young Chinese Christians.

Based on the negative experience of some Chinese Christian churches in the past, and also the strictures of the outdated Constitution on the religion, the non-state-registered churches not only feel generally unsafe but also they face uncertainty. In order to better protect themselves, these churches have learned to organize discreetly, and to minimize their public visibility to avoid direct confrontations with the government. Their low public visibility helps to reduce the possible threats to their survival. They do not need to proselyte or advertise publicly. Instead, most proselyting is done by their members. They usually spread Christian faith by sharing scriptures and their testimonies with friends, families, and even strangers, and by invitations to attend Sunday services. This has been an effective way to introducing Christianity to the nonreligious, because the Chinese people usually trust their families and friends.

The rise of numerous Christian churches has both positive and negative impacts on the development of Christianity in China and their relationships with the government. At the state level, the government hopes that Christian faith can foster social stability, economic improvement, and moral support to balance the pervasive materialism, pursuit of personal gain, and unfair competition (Lee and Chow 2013). In pursuit of these objectives, the government has established a variety of arrangements and relationships with the Christian churches. Churches having closer relationships with government receive various privileges. Overall, however, the purpose behind the government's interventions in religious activities is a way that "the Chinese

Communist Party-state seeks continued domination over society,” in combination with its lack of trust in Christianity (Vala 2013). Thus, the Chinese government holds an ambivalent attitude toward Christianity: it appreciates its contributions to social order, yet it is afraid that it may eventually become too powerful and so it tries to counterbalance its impact by supporting traditional Chinese religions.

In addition, the development of Christianity at the social level has both positive and negative consequences. Christian teachings and fixed rules can generate conflicts and frictions with the values and cultural ideas already established in Chinese society. For example, Christianity’s monotheistic practice imposes a threat to polytheistic religion. The Taoist and Buddhist adherents try to protect themselves by claiming rights and privileges from the government. Despite these efforts, Christian influence is growing because the Christian way of life is more relevant to ongoing social problems than is the case for the other religions.

The development of Christianity in contemporary China can be best understood from a cultural perspective. This helps us to understand the relationships between Christian churches and the Chinese government as an interaction between two unique ideologies, even though the government continues to treat Christian churches as individuals due to the lack of a mature regulatory framework on religion.

Considering the Taoist teaching of Yin-Yang principles as one of the backbones of Chinese social and political structure allows us to expand our perceptions of the “conflicts” or disagreements that have occurred between Christianity and the Chinese government. From this view, Christian churches have to find ways to work around or within the regulatory framework in order to survive in China; Christianity is not inferior to the Chinese state cult. Simultaneously, the Yin-Yang interaction shows how the contacts between churches and the state bring

improvements to both sides even though their interactions are not always smooth and successful. Understanding the multifaceted realities brought into existence by the interaction of Yin and Yang helps us to see the world not as composed of only black or white, strong or weak, “right or wrong,” but rather that these assumed polarities overlap and merge into a single reality. As Fowler and Fowler assert, “Yin and yang affect all aspects of life, even the temperament of an individual, nature of a society, war, and religion. They make life possible, their interaction creating the relativity necessary for existence. Rest and motion, contradiction and expansion, advance and retreat are the dynamics of the universe” (2008:52-53).

The Chinese government intentionally controls the development of Christianity in China today, and such action creates two outcomes. My findings show that as the government has placed heavy regulation on religious activities, it has seemed to constrain the development of religion in China in the public sphere. In reality, however, such heavy regulation both inhibits religious institutions in their attempts to maintain their presence in China and also encourages them to find other creative ways to reach out to people. These dual outcomes are like two sides of a coin; they impede the development of Christianity in China from a legal perspective and simultaneously encourage its development under the table. As a result, the Chinese people become skeptical toward government policies on many current issues, and some turn to religious institutions for emotional and spiritual support, which establishes a closer relationship between these institutions and the people.

Everything is created through the interaction of Yin-Yang; nothing exists unconstrained and unrelated to one and the other, despite the distinct obligation each “part” must fulfill. The Yin-Yang principles suggest that in order for all existences to sustain and achieve transcendence, they must obtain *hseng sheng* or be “mutually rising.” As Billington explains, “*hseng sheng*

means not just that one cannot exist without the other, but that one is constantly moving towards, and taking the nature of, the other” (1997: 111).

The Yin-Yang principles also confirm that relationships between phenomena are not only complementary but also paradoxical and contradictory. The coexistence of both totalitarian and liberal elements in the relationship between religion and government in China reflects two ongoing realities: the occurrence of religious development among the Chinese people and continuing social tension and struggle at the national level. Although the progress of religious freedom in China at the national level may not meet the international standards, the frequent contact between religious groups and the Chinese government has led to a measure of control, recognition, and support for Christian churches in Chinese society. The development of religion in China has not been consistent or smooth; the relationship between religion and the state has historically been volatile. The vicissitudes of religious freedom in China are comparable to the movement of the sea. At one point, it seems inactive, but at other times, it rises and becomes violent. What is certain is that the relationship is dynamic and connected. History shows the persistence and strength of Yin in religion; decades of CCP’s suppression of religion did not eradicate its deeply fixed roots. At the turn of the twenty-first century, China’s astonishing economic development has negatively impacted its social fabric (Moeller 2006; Cooper 2010). My field research suggests that Chinese society needs, even depends on the support of religious institutions to maintain societal balance. Continuing social needs and dissatisfactions will continue to draw religion and the Chinese political authority, Yin and Yang, closer to each other in an interdependent relationship.

Obviously, not all relationships between religious institutions and the Chinese government will evolve harmoniously and evenly. There will be sporadic conflicts and some

religions may even face elimination as the Yang within them becomes overly dominant and overt. As with the clash of underground churches and the central government in the early 1990s, when the Yin-impact of these underground churches rebelled against the Three-Self Patriotic Church, reached a climax and became Yang which exceeded the Chinese government's control, resulting in suppression and coercion in favor of tighter government restriction to retreat in favor of tighter government restriction (Billington 1997), other churches may exceed accommodation. However, even chaos and destruction are not absolutely negative; they bring new forms of life into existence, and life is an eternal movement: "Eternity is a circle, having neither beginning nor end. Within it, the yin is constantly moving and changing into the yang, and the yang into the yin" (Billington 1997:113). Thus, the interactions between Christian churches and the Chinese government will continue to vacillate between Yin and Yang, with Christianity continuing an important, and perhaps increasing, role in Chinese society.

### *Research Limitations*

My research had several limitations. This study was primarily limited by its sample size. The sample size of 48 respondents could have been expanded by including those who were Christians before the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Including them in this research would provide important understandings about the impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution on the development of Christianity in China. The experiences of these Christians would teach us about the differences between official and non-official churches.

Second, I have not explored in detail regarding the differences between official and non-official churches. Although my respondents' experiences at both types of church did not prevent them from attending either there are important differences that deserve study.

Third, my research would provide a more comprehensive view of the development of Christianity in contemporary Chinese cities if I also conducted interviews in other Chinese cities. It remains unclear how much one can generalize from Beijing to all of China.

Finally, timing is also an important factor. I would want to avoid conducting such research in Beijing during August and October of each year, simply because most of the Chinese Christians that I met were not Beijing local residents. Some months there are long breaks because of Chinese national holidays, such as the Chinese National Holiday on October 1<sup>st</sup>. It is a 7-day long vacation, and many non-Beijing residents travel during that time frame. Some churches do not even operate during this period because their preachers are also on vacation.

#### *Future Research*

For future research, I would like to conduct comparative studies of the development of Christianity in different cities and also compare urban and rural areas. Beijing culture is certainly different from cities in the southern part of China. The south is more liberal due to the influence of Hong Kong culture. I have barely touched the range of possible differences due to economic and geographic diversity.

Another possible improvement to the study would be interviewing the same participants again. A few interviews were generated during the analysis of the data collected on my first trip to Beijing. Instead of asking these new questions to new respondents, I would like to re-interview respondents in greater depth.

Finally, a truly comparative study would require information from both the irreligious and devotees of religious traditions other than Christianity. Such research would provide greater information regarding other people's perceptions of Christianity, and their views about Christianity that have either encouraged or impeded its development in China through the years.

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## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1.

Five Churches Where Field Research was Conducted\*

Church	Status	Membership	No. of interviews	Age Range Of the Church-goers	Size of Each Congregation
Old Protestant Church	Official	No	8	30 - 80	800-1000 people/Session
Young Protestant Church	Official	No	1	20-80	800-1000 people/Session
Conditional Church	Non-official	Yes	14	20-80	100-200 Members
Basement Church	Non-official	No	4	20-75	100-150 Members
Separatist Church	Non-official	Yes	9	25-60	70 Members

\* Note: The names shown are pseudonyms created for the churches included in this study.

Figure 2.

Research Participants

Church	The Status	No. of Respondents	No. of Interviews	Gender Ratio (F:M)	Age (Range)
Old Protestant Church	State-sanctioned	13	8	13:0	40-70
Young Protestant Church	State-sanctioned	1	1	1:0	40-50
Conditional Church	With Temporary Venue	20	14	11:9	20-80
Basement Church	Non-state-sanctioned	5	4	3:2	20-40
Separatist Church	Non-state-sanctioned	9	9	0:9	20-50
<b>Total: 5 churches</b>	--	<b>48</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>7:5</b>	<b>20-80</b>
Other	CASS	4	4	1:3	40-80

## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A. Interview Guide*

Topics to be addressed are listed under each specific research question (RQ)

Background about self and family:

- Please tell me a little bit about yourself. (Your name; marital status; profession; level of education; age; living status in Beijing; family members; and his or her relationship with family.)

RQ1. What is Christianity in the eyes of Chinese Christians in Beijing?

- Could you please tell me about your understanding and your perception of Christianity?

RQ2. How has Christianity entered, influenced, and changed the lives of Chinese Christians?

- Could you please tell me what things are important to you and why you think they are important to you?
- Tell me about how religious you are.
- Please explain your relationship with others (relatives, friends, co-workers, etc.)

RQ3. How have Christian faith and the teachings of Christ been incorporated into people's daily activities?

- Could you please tell me about what religious holidays you celebrate and how you celebrate?
- Please explain what reading or visual materials you own that have helped you spiritually

RQ4. Why do Christians think Christianity is needed in China today, and what have they done about it?

- Could you tell me about the relationship you see between religion and secular life (e.g., conflict or harmony)?
- Please explain why you think Christianity is important.

RQ5. How are Chinese Christians organized in contemporary Chinese society?

- Could you tell me about what religious activities participate in and how long you have been part of these activities?
- Please share your experiences and the things you like and dislike about these activities.
- Please explain what social or political organization you are currently associated with.

*Appendix B. List of Research Participants*

*For the safety of the research participants, their identities have been kept anonymous with pseudonyms.*

<b>Old Protestant Church</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Background</b>
1. Older Sister 1	60-70	Beijing native; Retired; married; used to work at a state-enterprise
2. Older Sister 2	60-70	Beijing native; Retired; married; used to work at a state-enterprise
3. Older Sister 3	60-70	Beijing native; Retired; married; used to work at a middle school
4. Older Sister 4	60-70	Non-Beijing native; married; own a store;
4. Ms. Ping	40-50	Non-Beijing native; divorced; part-time worker
6. Mrs. Meng	40-50	Non-Beijing native; married; real-estate agent
7. Lucy	20-30	Non-Beijing native; single; college student
8. Megan	40-50	Beijing native; single; not working at the moment
9. Mrs. Jiang	50-60	Non-Beijing native; married; own her business
10. Ms. Xia	20-30	Beijing native; single; just return from study abroad
11. Mrs. Mei	40-50	Beijing native; married; working
12. Ms. Ting	40-50	Non-Beijing native; single; working
13. Ms. Yi	20-30	Beijing native; single; college student
<b>Young Protestant Church</b>		

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Background</b>
1. Mrs. Qin ( <i>Chin</i> )	40-50	Non-Beijing native; Married, retired, used to work for the state government.
<b>Conditional Church</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Background</b>
1. Mr. Zhou	30-40	Non-Beijing native; Married, Businessman
2. Mrs. Zhou	30-40	Non-Beijing native; Married, housewife
3. Mr. Wei	20-30	Beijing native; married; working
4. Mrs. Wei	20-30	Beijing native; married; working
5. Mrs. Wei's mom	50-60	Beijing native; married; working
6. Mrs. Wei's dad	50-60	Beijing native; married; working
7. Mr. Xiao	40-50	Beijing native; married; working
8. Mrs. Xiao	40-50	Beijing native; married; working
9. Mrs. Xiao's mom	70-80	Beijing native; married; working
10. Mrs. Xiao's dad	70-80	Beijing native; married; working
11. Mrs. Xiao's daughter (Jenny)	20-30	Beijing native; single; college student;
12. Mr. Kong	40-50	Beijing native; married; working
13. Mrs. Kong	40-50	Beijing native; married; working

14. Mr. Lan	20-30	Non-Beijing native; single; college graduate; searching for employment
15. Mr. Shao	20-30	Beijing native; single; working at the airport
16. Mrs. Cathy	20-30	Non-Beijing native; married; PhD and working
17. Ms. Ru	20-30	Non-Beijing native; single; college graduate; working
18. Ms. Fang	20-30	Non-Beijing native; single; college graduate; working
19. Ms. Fan	20-30	Non-Beijing native; married; living abroad; college student
20. Mr. Long	30-40	Non-Beijing native; single; looking for a stable job
<b>Basement Church</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Background</b>
1. Mr. Wang	20-30	Beijing native; recently married.
2. Mrs. Wang	20-30	Beijing native; recently married.
3. Ms. Jia	30-40	Beijing native; single; a teacher
4. Ms. Huang	30-40	Beijing native; single; freelancer
5. Mr. Zhuang	20-30	Non Beijing native; college student
<b>Separatist Church</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Background</b>
1. The Young Priest	30-40	Not Beijing native; married; also works at the Old Protestant Church. One of the founders of the Separatist Church

2. Mr. Zhao	30-40	Not Beijing native; Single; constantly facing religious challenges because his work is associated with Traditional Chinese culture.
3. Mr. Hong	30-40	Not Beijing native; married; was a Buddhist, searching for business opportunities.
4. Mr. Li	30-40	Not Beijing native; recently returned from abroad. Establishing his own business.
5. Mr. Yao	20-30	Not Beijing native; dating; works at a software related company in Beijing
6. Mr. Han	20-30	Not Beijing native; computer science major
7. Mr. Luo	20-30	Not Beijing native; study in Beijing.
8. Mr. Kang	20-30	Beijing native; single. Currently in school. Hoping to find a girlfriend who is also a Christian
9. Mr. Bo	20-30	Beijing native; single. Currently in school

CASS Professor 1: Study Marxism and Christianity

Cass Professor 2: retired scholar who is an expert in Taoism

CASS Professor 3: Study house churches in Beijing

CASS Professor 4: Study Marxism and Christianity

*Appendix C. Additional Information on Chinese Culture and Traditional Religions*  
*The Role of Chinese Culture*

Chinese social structure differs from Western societies: instead of a systematic, and rationalized social system (Madsen 2013; Dunch 2001), the social structure of Chinese society is chaotic, less-structured, and confusing. It mirrors my findings about the different relationships that each of the non-official churches has with the government. This is because throughout Chinese history, religions have been dependent on the authorization of the emperors and the approval of the elites. Consequently, they have always had inferior statuses in relation to the state. This social and political structure was influenced by Chinese culture, which was made up of the amalgamation of Chinese indigenous beliefs and the “three teachings,” Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Teiser 1995). Although their focus and teachings were independent from each other and the intensity of their impact on society varied, by the end of Han Dynasty, they became complementary parts to each other that eventually became one in strengthening the impact of Chinese culture (Fan 2010).

*The impact of Confucianism*

Confucius was a modest philosopher. He never claimed his teachings were his own invention, but rather, they were Chinese indigenous beliefs, rituals, and practices that were collected and organized by him, because he valued them as important heritage that soon would be lost and forgotten during the Spring and Autumn Warring period. From studying Confucius’ teaching, we can identify both spiritual and practical beliefs and ritual practices that are representational of Chinese culture (Yang 1992). He did not think his teachings were associated with a particular religion or religiousness. Nonetheless, Confucius’ pragmatic teachings were equally religious. For example, one of the most important teachings was *filial piety*, which

required great responsibilities of the young to take care of their parents when they became feeble. Their responsibilities to their parents did not end when parents passed away; paying respect and worshipping their ancestors were family responsibilities as well. Chinese people were convinced that the well-being of the living children was closely tied and influenced by how well they treated their ancestors. When they offered good food and burnt paper money to the dead, in return, their ancestors would protect and bless them. Thus, the practicality of Confucius' teachings was heavily accompanied by spiritual influence (Yang 1992).

Although Confucius' teachings were not religious in comparison to Buddhism and Taoism, Confucius and his disciples such as Mencius emphasized that the organization of the state on earth was governed absolutely by Heaven (*Tian*) (Tu and Tucker 2004). His teachings consolidated the power of the emperor because he argued that the emperor was the son of heaven (*Tian Zi*). The Heaven assigned the one to rule and govern the state, so civilians should not question or challenge Heaven's authority. Under the emperor's governance, his leaders should be chosen based on their qualifications demonstrated by examination. Confucius' teaching on leadership had already paved the way for meshing religion and politics, because the entitlement of "son of heaven" had already given the emperor power over his subjects on earth and, indeed, granted the only source for communication with heaven for blessings. Confucius' teachings established the groundwork for Taoism and Buddhism to seed and thrive in China (Cohen 1992).

### *The impact of Taoism*

Taoist teachings were less structured than Confucius' teachings and emphasized spirituality and elements beyond this life rather than social (Moeller 2006; Billington 1996). The mysterious and enigmatic nature of Taoism made it less appealing to the power holders, especially when it discouraged uniformity and equal standards for all. Taoist teaching

accentuated the flow of “*qi*,” which was known as the natural force that could mold the surroundings including human’s fate or a state’s destiny (Fang 2011). It was a constant moving force that has its own way, the so-called “Tao” to follow. Humans should not resist or attempt to manipulate it. If people disobeyed the “Tao,” reciprocal events (both positive and negative) would happen (Fowler and Fowler 2008).

The ideals of abandoning structure and achieving spontaneity were not appealing to power holders. That was why Taoism was never popular or well-accepted by the emperor and the elites in ancient China. Besides, China was managed by the qualified elites, selected by their performance in an examination system designed by Confucius. Thus, those who were in office were either Confucius’ disciples or followers, and “elite values came to dominate late imperial popular culture” (Bell 1989).

Although Taoism did not have an important role in organizing high society in ancient China, it was important in regulating and setting up the lower levels of Chinese society. Because Taoist teaching encouraged personal development and personal connection with nature in order to achieve the “way” (Tao), many lay people, members of exotic professions, and believers in less sophisticated folklore religions and local traditions were more inclined to associate with Taoism (Weber 1951).

Taoist promises of health, longevity, and the potential to become gods or goddesses established Chinese spirituality and their connection with gods. “Where did Laozi (the leader of Taoism) go?” has always been a mystery for Taoism. Many people believed that his disappearance in the woods after he handed the *Tao De Ching* to his disciple and others suggested that he rode on a puff of white cloud and went to heaven and became one of the gods. There was an actual ranking and structure of gods and goddesses in Taoist tradition. “The

‘heavenly masters’ organized a distinct religious group with its own pantheon of gods and bureaucracy” (Fan 2010:207). The lack of monotheism has been prevalent and pervasive in Chinese culture, because in Chinese culture, people are convinced that gods are also like human beings who are responsible for solving different personal problems. Thus, people who wished to have a son would worship *Guanyin*, and those who sought for money and promotion, *Guan Gong*. There was no conflict, punishment, or even jealousy in worshipping different gods in the Taoist belief system, and this ideology paved the way for Buddhist traditions and beliefs.

### *The impact of Buddhism*

Although Buddhism was the first external religion to enter Chinese culture, it was able to blend in after it underwent some transformation in its practices and structure. Not only was Buddhism the first religion established as an institutional religion in early Chinese history, it turned its teaching and practices into popular Buddhism, which made it more accessible and available to common people. That was an advantage for the development of Buddhism, because throughout Chinese history, Buddhism faced persecution and rejection by the state. However, because of its prevalence, popularity, and flexibility among the Chinese people, it was able to revive and thrive until today (Yang 2012).

Popular Buddhism became a daily religion in Chinese society over time, it imposed fewer regulations and requirements and lowered the standard to become a Buddhist. For example, people did not have to become vegetarians to be Buddhist followers, nor were they required to reside in the monastery to study Buddhist teachings. They had much freedom in deciding when or where to visit the Buddhist temples. An important feature to notice about the impact of Buddhism was the prevalence of Buddha figures in people’s homes. They could

worship and perform Buddhist rituals within their homes, and this turned Buddhist teaching and practices into an independent and privatized religion (Fan 2010; Gao 2010).

*The “three teachings” return in one*

“*San Jiao Gui Yi*” is a common phrase in Chinese that describes the amalgamation of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism into one single Chinese culture. Their teachings overlap and consolidate traditional Chinese culture and heritage. As Yao Xinzhong said, “Confucianism was expected to provide the moral principles of social and political life, while Daoism and Buddhism were to sanction Confucian morality and deal with psychological and spiritual issues” (Fan 2010:215).

As a consequence of thousands years of interaction, the three teachings have become the backbone of Chinese culture and society and have given shape to the current social and political landscape in Chinese society. The dominant influence of Confucianism has given a visible power to the state. However, other religions, including Christianity, have been behind the public scene, perhaps less visible, but have continued to influence Chinese society.