

Chapter 14

The Challenges of the Church in China in the Next Decade (Kim-Kwong Chan)

Abbreviations

ACC	Autonomous Christian Communities
BRI	Belt Road Initiatives
CPC	Chinese Communist Party
PRC	People's Republic of China
TSPM/CCC	Three Self Patriotic Movement/China Christian Council

Introduction

After the end of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China began to adopt an Open and Reform Policy with the marketisation of China's economy, which resulted in an economic boom. Part of the Open and Reform Policy included re-opening religious venues such as churches and allowing religious believers to practice religion hitherto banned during the Cultural Revolution. Christianity, once considered as decimated from Chinese society after three decades of suppression by the Chinese Communist regime, suddenly emerged from the shadows. Christianity rapidly expanded among the official affiliated Three Self Patriotic Movement/China Christian Council (TSPM/CCC)¹ and among the various unregistered Autonomous Christian Communities (ACC),² also known as house churches, underground churches, or family churches.

From the Governments' official figures which only counted those Christians who were under the Government's registered churches, there were only three million Chinese Protestants in

¹ "Home Page," China Christian Council National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China (TSPM/CCC), [Available at: <https://en.ccctspm.org/>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

² Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 81.

1982 (0.38 percent of the population). This number raised to ten million in the 1990s (1 percent of the population), twenty-three million in 2010 (2 percent of the population) and in 2018, thirty-eight million (2.7 percent of the population).³ However the number would be much higher if one includes those churches which were not operating under the Government's control. For example, in 2011, Pew Research Center presented the figure of fifty-eight million Protestants in China (4 percent of the population) as its methodology included those not registered with the authority – hence with a higher figure than what the authority had provided.⁴ The Christians population had grown ten to twenty times larger within a short span of thirty years, depending on if one included the non-registered Christians or not. In 2014, Professor Yang Fenggang of Purdue University suggested that, by 2030, the number of Chinese Protestants would outpace the number of Chinese Communist Party (CPC) Members.⁵ With such rapid growth, the Protestant community in China established theological training, pastoral formation, ecumenical connection, local church planting, and even overseas missions. Such phenomenal development of the Church in China drew attention from the global Christian community, especially with respect to its impressive church growth while under political constraint, its development of spirituality while facing persecution, and its remarkable potential in global missions as China has increasingly connected with the world through its Belt Road Initiatives (BRI).⁶

³ Kim-Kwong Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, series edited by Dyron B. Daugherty (Minneapolis, MN; Fortress, 2019): 32.

⁴ C. Hackett, B. Grim, V. Skirbekk, M. Stonawski, and A. Goujon, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2011): 84, 97-110.

⁵ Alison Lesley, "The Christian and Muslim Community in China is multiplying", *World Religion News*, 7th September 2015, [Available at: <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/christianity/the-christian-and-muslim-community-in-china-is-multiplying/>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024]. See also Jamil Anderlini, "The Rise of Christianity in China", *Financial Times*, 11th November 2014, [Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/a6d2a690-6545-11e4-91b1-00144feabdc0>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

⁶ For a brief summary, see Jie Yu and Jon Wallace, "What is China's Belt Road Initiative?" *Chatham House Explainer*, 13th September 2021, [Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

Since assuming the leadership over China in 2013, Xi Jinping has not only reversed China's Reform and Open Policy (a marketed economy adopted since the 1980s) back to the pre-1980 Socialist Planned Economic Policy but he has also governed China under a strong CPC autocratic governance; this has decreased room for individual freedom and increased control over all sectors of life including religion. Furthermore, Xi positioned China as a rival with the West and shielded China from Western influences such as democracy, human rights, and even religious cultures such as Christianity.

Under Xi's reign, which has also covered the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), the Church in China has faced many new restrictions, challenges, transformations, and opportunities. This chapter looks at the challenges ahead of this vibrant and dynamic Christian people numbering in the tens of millions living under an autocratic regime at the juncture of entering a new world order. First, the chapter provides a general orientation of Xi Jinping's governance, particularly those elements with a direct bearing on the present state of the Christian Church in China. Then I highlight several issues that I perceive as major challenges facing the Church in China in the coming decade: ecclesial manifestation and internalisation of faith; Christian unity; Sinicisation (Christianity in China or Chinese Christianity), and lastly, missiology, diasporas, and nationalistic sentiment.⁷ Some of these challenges may prove particular to the Church in China, and some may resonate with other Christian communities due to living in a digitalised world with inter-connectivity often transcending geographic boundaries. After all, Christian communities all embrace similar values, live in the same world, connect through the same Internet, and are affected by similar global trends.

⁷ Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, 198-200.

Xi Jinping's Reign 2012-2023 and Its Implication for Chinese Christianity

Over the past decade, the world has faced many challenges – from global warming and the effects of climate change; to multiple refugee crises; to the war against Ukraine; to the devastating COVID-19 pandemic when schools, public institutions, churches, and shops were closed, and physical contact was discouraged. Virtual reality became a daily reality. This pandemic not only took nearly seven million lives⁸ but also slowed the global economy by shutting down factories, interrupting supply chains, and the decrease in consumer demands affecting every country including China. The world is still recovering from the pandemic as other global crises emerge daily.

Xi Jinping became China's paramount leader during the past decade of global turbulence – a time when China has been at its strongest moment in history in terms of wealth, military capability, production, average per capita income, mobilisation capacity, political control, and geopolitical ambition. Xi has a vision for China: a China that would demand respect from the world by its newly gained national strength, a China that would become the economic engine of Eurasia via the Belt Road Initiatives, a China that would format a multipolar world order with China as one of the most important players, a China that would regain all its sovereign territories including Taiwan, and, most significantly, a China governed by an ideological construct encompassing the vision of a Socialist China under the authorship of Xi's name: "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."⁹ Xi's vision on China was

⁸ This was the figure as of August 2023. See WHO, "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard", *World Health Organization Website*, [Available at: <https://covid19.who.int/>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

⁹ Xi's thoughts were enshrined in the Party's Constitution at the 20th CPC National Congress, in October 2022. Xi's Thought is now on par with Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Mao Tse Tung's thoughts, as the guiding principle of the CPC. See Xinhua (New China News Agency), "Full Text of Resolution on Party Constitution Amendment", *China SCI*, 22nd October 2022, [Available at: http://english.scio.gov.cn/20thcpccongress/2022-10/22/content_78480782.html], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

the realisation of the promises made to the Chinese people by the CPC since the foundation of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949: an egalitarian and prosperous society, a proud nation to build upon its historical and cultural heritage, a nation on par with Western powers to shape the global geopolitical order, and a sovereign and unified China. To achieve his goals, Xi consolidated his leadership over the Party, established direct Party control over all social sectors, and promoted his form of socialist ideology along with a unified nationalistic political culture.

The last decade from 2013 to 2023 has witnessed drastic changes in China's domestic governance affecting every sphere of life, including religion and certainly Christianity in particular. Radical changes in China's foreign relations during this time have seen anti-Westernism sentiments affecting the links that Chinese Christians have with fellow Christians abroad. As well, these changes have impacted many other relationships. Religion in China, as with all other civil organisations there, has followed the political guidance of Xi during this time. In Xi's vision, China would experience rejuvenation along with her long cultural heritage coupled with xenophobia and strong nationalistic sentiment.

China has long regarded Christianity as a product of Western culture and associates it with Western imperialistic aggression that humiliated, bullied, and colonised China by robbing China of its once proud cultural heritage. Islam was regarded as a religion carrying foreign symbols, such as Arabic characters. Buddhism and Daoism were regarded as Chinese cultural heritage to promote as part of the nascent Chinese rejuvenated culture.

Under Xi, three major policies have existed on religion: de-foreignisation, Sinicisation, and loyalty to the Party. Since 2015, the Zhejiang Province ordered the forceful removal of crosses from churches, a campaign that gradually extended from Zhejiang Province to other parts

of China.¹⁰ It seems that the authorities would like to cut down visible Western or foreign influence – such as crosses on Christian churches – from the surface of the Chinese society. Not long after that initiative, the government also banned all Christmas celebrations in public and instead promoted Chinese festival days and traditions to counter Western influences. In 2016, Xi chaired the important once-every-five-years National Religious Work Conference and declared that all religion must be sinicised to support the authorities’ national policy and interests through religious teachings. With respect to this, he said that religious organisations should:

[...] merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture, abide by Chinese laws and regulations, and devote themselves to China’s reform and opening up drive and socialist modernisation in order to contribute to the realisation of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation. [...] [Religious groups should] dig deep into doctrines and canons that are in line with social harmony and progress, and favourable for the building of a healthy and civilised society, and interpret religious doctrines in a way that is conducive to modern China’s progress and in line with our excellent traditional culture.¹¹

Finally, the clergy of all religious organisations initiated by the Party Loyalty Campaign would have to pledge their obedience and loyalty to the Party, just as in any other social organisation in China submitting to the Party’s leadership. This pledge usually centres on the following slogans or some variants of it: “Adhere to the Words of the Party, Follow the Party’s Lead, and Be Thankful to the Graciousness of the Party.”¹² The requirement for those who wish to observe religion in China has changed from patriotism – love the nation – to the new demand of obedience to the Party. This requirement reflects the increase of Party dominance in China

¹⁰ Nanlai Cao, “Spatial Modernity, Party Building, and Local Governance: Putting the Christian Cross Removal Campaign in Context”, *The China Review* 17(1), (February 2017): 29-52. Additionally, crescents from mosques were also removed since this time.

¹¹ Xinhua, “Xi Calls for Improved Religious Work”, *Xinhua News*, 24th April 2016, [Available at: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/24/content_38312410.htm], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

¹² For a Tibetan example, see Gong Cun, “Be a Good Monk and Nun, Who always Listens to the Party, Feels Grateful to the Party and Follows the Party”, *Xizang Ribao* [Tibetan Daily], 13th January 2023, [Available at: http://www.tibet.cn/cn/religion/202301/t20230113_7345261.html], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024]. For a Catholic example, see Leshan Diocese’s study campaign, “Learn the History of the Party, Adhere to the Words of the Party, and Follow the Party’s Lead”, *Sichuan Catholic Web*, 21st June 2021, [Available at: <https://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/report/21060924-1.htm>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

under Xi's governance. The Church in China (those in TSPM/CCC), abided by these new measures to organise sinicisation seminars and to stage loyalty to Party activities – all while keeping to their usual ecclesial activities. The non-registered fractions became less visible as the authorities' surveillance and social control intensified with sporadic reports of harassments and arrests. During the three-year lockdown measures due to the COVID Zero-Tolerance policy, the whole nation came to a halt, and almost all ecclesial physical activities were suspended.

Ecclesiology Manifestation and Internalisation of Faith

One of the most well-known characteristics of the Church in China is its rapid growth during the past several decades despite the unfavourable socio-political environments such as hostile authority and lack of resources. This rapid increase of believers caught the attention of the Christian world especially during the 1980s and 1990s as the Chinese Christian community developed from merely a few million into tens of millions in a couple of decades. Based on such a growth rate, one can easily project that China may soon have the largest bloc of Christian population in the world.¹³ Although the diverse reasons for such astonishing growth lies beyond the scope of this chapter,¹⁴ one thing certainly agreed upon by all is the significance of the large number of Christians there.

The answer to the question, “How many Christians are there in China?” has long been a contentious issue with wide variations depending on methodologies and political stances. Official figures tend to be on the conservative side, and the ACC fractions and their sympathisers abroad would usually suggest a higher figure. A recent report from the Pew Research Center –

¹³ Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, 186-8.

¹⁴ For some of the reasons, see Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, 176-81.

the same centre that gave a high figure of sixty-seven million in 2011 – now came up with a lower figure of twenty million, suggesting a decline of Christian population.¹⁵ Many scholars, such as Yang Fenggang of Purdue University, hold strong reservations on this finding.¹⁶ While the number of Christians in China is an important one, the strong governmental containment on Christianity in China would also contribute to the distortion on the validity of the methodologies as well as the results that further frustrate meaningful discussion on this issue. Despite the vastly different headcount of Christians in China, an implicit narrative seems to interpret these numbers on socio-political constructs – namely the greater the number, the stronger the socio-political representation and influence the Church in China has on Chinese society.

The above assumption may prove valid in sociological studies or political science since the numerical strength of a civil group or institution with clear membership – especially in a democratic society where equal socio-political rights are granted to every individual – may represent the desire or aspiration of a certain portion of the population that helps shape that society. However, two interrelated questions need attention vis-à-vis the number of Christians in China: (1) does the number of Christians have a direct correlation with Christian socio-political influence? and (2) more importantly, how does the number of believers relate to ecclesiastical manifestation such as the population of saved souls, the quality of spirituality, and even the nature of the Church's socio-religious witness?

From a theological perspective, several different understandings of Church membership exist other than headcount. In ecclesiology, a church member is one who embraces the Christian

¹⁵ Pew Research Staff, “Measuring Religion in China”, *Pew Research Center*, 30th August 2023, [Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/measuring-religion-in-china>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

¹⁶ Isabel Ong, “Have China’s Christians Peaked? Pew Researches the Data Debate”, *Christianity Today*, 30th August 2023, [Available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/august/china-christian-churches-pew-measuring-religion-surveys.html>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

faith along with the initiation rite of communion with all the Saints. Such a commitment would usually be active but could also be in a passive or delegated mode as in the case of paedobaptism. In soteriology, as one makes a conscious decision to accept the lordship of Jesus Christ, that person would live in the realm of eternal salvation. Thus, any number of Chinese Christians would include those who made such a confession from the time of the resurrection of Jesus until the Eschaton. Pastorally speaking, ecclesial functionality would include those members actively engaging with (and hence physically connecting to) the group of believers and catechumens or seekers; this would not necessarily involve church membership. Thus, very different understandings exist between theological and sociological aspects relative to the number of believers.

In the case of the Church in China, the high number of believers would probably indicate the increasing number of people known by others to have embraced the Christian faith; this provides a soteriological indication relative to the increase of saved souls. However, the zero number on Christianity by Chinese officials during the Cultural Revolution when the authority declared that religion had been cleansed from Chinese society in 1970s – as well as the low number released by official documents since the 1980s – does not affect the functionality of the ecclesial communities in China since Christian perseverance and hope have not only preserved but also influenced many with consequences not manifested until years later. The current suggestion of a decline in the number of Christian believers in China proves sociologically significant. The primary theological narrative would be the ecclesial functionality on preservation and propagation of faith regardless of a high or low number of members.

The low number presented by current reports on the decline of the Church in China may reflect those who have since withdrawn from publicly professing their Christian faith as a

sociological interpretation. The same result can also suggest Christian withdrawal from the public sphere due to political pressure; these may have instead turned inward as a spiritual journey into a typological wilderness. They may have concentrated on and consolidated into ecclesial functionality or internalised their faith – all these are signs of ecclesial maturity.

The Church in China needs to develop its ecclesial self-understanding with both sociological and theological narratives. The challenge is to go beyond the triumphalism of a high conversion number into the often-silent phase of in-depth theological reflection to focus on ecclesial-spiritual maturity – a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. Although the Church in China exists as part of the social fabric of Chinese society, it is also a spiritual community in communion with the *ekklesia* beyond time and space, distinguishing itself from any other social groups in China.

“How many Christians are there in China?” I once asked a wise old Christian in China in the evening. He said, “Look at the sky and how many stars do you see?” It was a cloudy night. He said, “If the weather is good, you see more. If it is overcast, you may not see any. Yet all the stars are there.”¹⁷ He gave a soteriological narrative in the context of the socio-political reality.

Christian Unity

Unlike Catholics, no demand exists for Protestants to organically join as one visible ecclesial entity. Protestants have ecclesial flexibility to start their own church should they have a unique emphasis on a particular doctrine or polity. Such allowances serve as a safety valve; if a group has too much tension within it, instead of fighting one another, one can always protest and form another group in the true spirit of Protestantism.

¹⁷ Interview by author with a brother in Christ, Miao Shuzhi, in Yantai, Shangdong, April 1980.

Due to political and theological differences, the Church in China has split into the TSPM/CCC and ACCs factions. Such divisions cause tremendous hurt and bitterness between these two groups. However, as with original denominational traditions relative to diverse doctrines and liturgies, the never-ending divisions of the ACCs and the internal power factions within each community – along with competition for support from ecclesial communities abroad – challenges unity in the Church in China. In fact, unity remains in short supply among Christians in China. Inter-ecclesial fights were not uncommon and at times even surprised Chinese officials. One senior Party official who served at a Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau, perplexed by such inter-ecclesial tension, once asked me:

Are you Christians not believing in the very same God? If so, why are you people fighting so much among yourselves, treating your co-religionists worse than your ideological enemies like us atheists, even appealing to us atheists for intervention? Why can't you people resolve your differences among yourselves through your religious teaching? Or do you people believe in different Gods? Is it only happening in China – Christianity with Chinese characteristics?¹⁸

I was speechless to answer this contextual challenge despite my years of training in Christian theology.

The rapid growth of Christianity in China during the past decades may have eased some of the inter-ecclesial tensions due to the overwhelming influx of new converts. This influx has focused ecclesial attention on the need to minister to new believers rather than on fighting each other and competing for new converts since there are plenty of unreached souls around. However, the competition for loyalty from new believers may at times also escalate existing tensions. Additionally, often a group will make exclusive claims over all Chinese Christians with the often-arbitrary use of the all-inclusive term, “Church in China” to denote their group. This is

¹⁸ Personal interview, Northwestern China, winter 2012, name, and location withheld for security reasons.

misleading to say that they represent all Christians in China, using terms such as the “House Church in China,” to denote their comprehensive representation. Such claims are theologically invalid in the Protestant tradition as Protestantism implies diverse voices and groups where one group cannot represent or rule over other groups. Such exclusive ecclesial claims implicitly imply that other groups are either under this group’s leadership or are apostates/heretics. This presents more of a theological narrative like Catholicism rather than Protestantism and denies the true ecclesial nature of the Church in China – further escalating inter-ecclesial tensions.

The Chinese Protestant community, despite the significant number of adherents, is divided into endless groups and factions that render this community weak. Such divisions cause a lack of consensus and increase the inability of believers to make collective decisions and take common actions. In contrast, Chinese Muslims, with far fewer numbers, have clearly made more of a socio-political impact in China, often successfully challenging the government to address their common needs. Protestants in China have yet to unite to champion their common interests.

As the Chinese authorities exercise increasing social control to shape a monolithic Chinese society, all Christians – regardless of their theological spectrum – are affected. However, as long as Chinese Protestant groups stress the common spiritual needs of Chinese society and the overall welfare of the Chinese Church in general above the needs of their own ecclesial factions or groups and achievements of their particular community, hope remains that Chinese Christians will move in the direction of authentic Christian unity as demonstrated by many signs of reconciliation.¹⁹ However, increasing socio-political pressure on the Church in

¹⁹ Kim-Kwong Chan, “Tensions and Reconciliation between the Autonomous Christian Community and the China Christian Council/Three Self Patriotic Movement”, in Robert Schreiter and Knud Jorgensen (eds), *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation* Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, vol. 16 (Oxford: Regnum, 2013): 290-92.

China may also cause different factions to strive for their own survival at the expense of other Christian groups that have fallen into the self-fulfilling prophecy of the Chinese authority on Christianity, who sees them as divided and conquered. Or, hopefully, the socio-political pressure may facilitate different Christian groups to draw closer together through their common interest in striving for survival. The current spiritual challenges for Chinese Christian leaders of both factions are indeed great, relative to their ecclesial vision beyond the self-interest of their own groups; meeting those challenges in unity will serve as a true mark of spiritual leadership.

Sinicisation: Christianity in China **or Chinese Christianity**

Christianity has long been regarded by both Chinese general population and authorities as a foreign – specifically Western – religion, given its mission history in China. The Chinese authorities' official historical narrative interpreted the Western world as an imperialistic force that exploited China, using Christianity as a form of cultural colonialism that damaged China's cultural heritage. Whether Western missionaries committed such cultural atrocity against China remains an important agenda item in academic discussions, currently inviting more controversy than consensus.

Despite different interpretations regarding the cultural impact of Christianity on China, one thing remains unambiguous: Chinese Christians consciously or otherwise have taken on a Western façade with respect to their manifestation of Christian faith. Church buildings in China today often look Western and are often incongruous in the surrounding landscape especially in the countryside. Church worship music is often translated Western hymnody. However beautifully written and composed, this music differs greatly from the musicological milieu of China. At present, Christianity in China is commonly perceived and even referred to as a foreign religion that happens to have inserted itself into China.

Chinese Christians in general also explicitly choose a Western appearance. Perhaps this has emerged as a subtle form of reaction to the authorities' accusation – or as a deliberate attempt to assert their identity separate from the rest of the Chinese social milieu in a dualistic worldview shaped by the Christian Fundamentalism commonly embraced by Chinese Christians. Regardless of the cause, the Western (or non-Chinese) appearance of Christianity in China became a part of Xi's xenophobic discourse against the West. Xi ordered all religions in China to sinicise as a political objective of governance on religion. Such a call for sinicisation seemed like more of a political campaign to foster a nationalistic society than a genuine indigenisation of religion. Xi clearly framed and proclaimed his content about this in political terms with respect to religious groups, saying they should "Merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture, abide by Chinese laws and regulations, and devote themselves to China's reform and opening up drive and socialist modernisation [*sic*] in order to contribute to the realisation of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation".²⁰ Since Xi's proclamation, the TSPM/CCC has devoted a tremendous amount of resources at all ecclesial administrative levels, also involving Christian groups abroad, responding to this government-induced political campaign. They held conferences, conducted workshops, and published books on the theme of the sinicisation of Christianity. They have promoted this topic in all churches in China as the top ministerial priority. They even constructed an English term with Chinese characteristics for this supposed theological endeavour – the Chinanisation of Christianity.²¹ The ACCs, however, basically kept their distance on this matter.

Despite the political nature of this sinicisation campaign, it has challenged the Church in China to *become* the Church of China. One of the major challenges facing Chinese Christianity is

²⁰ Xinhua, "Xi Calls for Improved Religious Work".

²¹ TSPM/CCC News, "Seminar on Chinanization of Christianity Commences in Hong Kong", *TSPM/CCC*, 31st May 2023, [Available at: <https://en.ccetspm.org/newsinfo/16342>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

its need to be accepted as a genuine part of Chinese society – not as an extension of a foreign entity intruding into China. Chinese Christians have paid a high price trying to gain a foothold in China. Although now at the highest percentage of the population reached since the introduction of Christianity at least fourteen hundred years ago, a long journey remains ahead for Christianity to be accepted as part of the Chinese social fabric. Hopefully, a day will come when Chinese Christians feel confident enough to incorporate their cultural heritage into their Chinese Christianity identity without fearing the betrayal of their Christian faith which they embraced with great cost. One can hope that they will feel comfortable enough to take down any cultural barriers separating them from the general Chinese population, a form of Christianity than can be accepted as a part of Chinese socio-cultural milieu.

Missiology, the Chinese Diaspora, and Nationalistic Sentiment

Since the 1980s, more than ten million Chinese people have emigrated to other countries,²² swelling the number of ethnic Chinese in the diaspora to more than forty-six million.²³ This number does not even include the tens of thousands of Chinese merchants, professionals, volunteers, and workers engaging in various business and construction activities in more than 140 countries under the general scheme of the Belt Road Initiatives promoted by Xi since 2013. The BRI has since that time become one of the largest infrastructure projects in the

²² IOM, “China”, *International Organization for Migration*, 2020 Figures, [Available at: <https://www.iom.int/countries/china>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

²³ Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, “Chinese Diaspora”, *Academy for Cultural Diplomacy Website*, [Available at: <https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?chinese-diaspora>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

world.²⁴ This entity exists as a new geopolitical entity which Xi has named “a community with a shared future for [hu]mankind [*sic*].”²⁵

The rapid church growth in China compounded by the increased Chinese population leaving China captured the imagination of mission-minded leaders to suggest that the Chinese Church operate as a potential major stakeholder in global mission. If there are ten million Chinese who have migrated to different countries in the last three decades, and if the Christian population among Chinese is about 3 percent (taking the mean average), then that should mean that about 300,000 Chinese Christians have carried the ecclesial characteristics and experiences of rapid Church growth to different countries. These potential Christian migrants would provide an important impetus for global mission to continue the legacy of Chinese mission movements since the late 1940s in the name of the *Back to Jerusalem* mission movement.²⁶ Furthermore, the Lausanne Movement has promoted Business as Mission (BAM),²⁷ which fits right into many mission-minded Chinese Christian entrepreneurs taking advantage of China’s BRI to promote Chinese business engaging in BRI regions – which largely overlap with the 10/40 Window. In fact, Christians under Socialist China engaged in global mission much earlier than the initiation of BRI, so the BRI simply facilitated this mission dynamic with a few dozen mission training centres already in operation by 2017 to prepare for Chinese missionaries.²⁸

²⁴ For a brief summary and update, see Shannon Tiezzi, “How China’s Belt and Road Took over the World”, *The Diplomat*, 12th September 2023, [Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/how-chinas-belt-and-road-took-over-the-world/>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

²⁵ China Daily, “A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”, *China Daily*, 18th January 2021, [Available at: <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202101/18/WS60054e10a31024ad0baa35af.html>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

²⁶ See Kim-Kwong Chan, “The Back to Jerusalem Movement: Mission Movement of the Christian Community in Mainland China”, in Wonsuk Ma and Kenneth R. Ross (eds), *Mission Spirituality and Authentic Discipleship* Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, vol. 14 (Oxford: Regnum, 2013): 182.

²⁷ Lausanne, “Business as Mission”, *Lausanne Movement*, [Available at: <https://lausanne.org/networks/issues/business-as-mission>], [Last accessed: 1st April 2024].

²⁸ Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, 194.

Most of these Chinese Christians in the diaspora, however, tended to congregate among themselves based on their origin hometown, their dialect, and their established ecclesial communities. For example, Wenzhou Christians formed Wenzhou churches that operated their Christian services in their dialects that were almost incomprehensible to non-Wenzhouese. These dialect- and regional-based Chinese Christian Churches abroad may serve also as a club for mutual support through a religious platform. In fact, the socio-ecclesial function of ethnic churches in hosting countries is rather common, such as the Congolese Christian traders in China who have formed their own churches in China serving both as a religious and a socio-commercial supporting group extending from the Democratic Republic of Congo into China.²⁹

These Chinese churches have also actively evangelised among their kinsfolk in the diaspora as shown by the fact that the Chinese Christian population has grown in the diaspora.³⁰ These dialect-based or ethnic Chinese Churches may also turn inward into an ecclesial ghetto holding onto their own traditions, customs, and identities, similar to Hasidic Jews in Europe during the medieval time.

Chinese Christians could contribute to the richness of the global Christian communion by both their unique ecclesial manifestations sustainable in a hostile environment, along with the spirituality of their suffering and resilience.³¹ If they launch out beyond their ethnic boundary to evangelise the local population, they may unconsciously convey a form of Christianity which carries a strong Chinese cultural-political characteristic. Such introduction of a socio-culturally shaped theology may re-enact what the missionaries from the West had presented to China a

²⁹ Gerda Heck, “Religion as Infrastructure: Congolese Migration, Diaspora, and Religious Networks”, 25th January 2021, Webinar Hong Kong University BRIFAITH lecture, [Available at: <https://asiar.hku.hk/event/religion-as-infrastructure-congolese-migration-diaspora-and-religious-networks/>], [Last accessed: 6th April 2024].

³⁰ For example, see Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (Philadelphia, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) and many of his subsequent writings.

³¹ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 225.

Western interpretation of Christianity, which was criticised by the Chinese authority as cultural imperialism and a Christianity hitherto tainted among the Chinese population. Chinese missionaries may easily draw similar criticisms from the hosting population as the Western missionaries drew from the Chinese population in the past.

The rise of Chinese nationalism and national prominence in various global contexts does facilitate Chinese global mission yet may accentuate the Chinese hegemonic undertone in their mission endeavours for a “Chinese” Christianity (a non-contextualised form of Christianity in other cultural milieus).

A major challenge in cross cultural mission engaged in by Chinese Christians – and in fact by all Christians – has to do with staying aware to not re-enact any sense of cultural superiority, which can result in a lack of genuine contextualisation of the gospel. Chinese Christians are new entrants to global mission, and they can benefit from many valuable experiences from other people without re-inventing the wheel or repeating the mistakes of their predecessors. Chinese Christians must do their utmost to learn from history with God’s help.

Conclusion

In merely forty years (since 1980), the People’s Republic of China has transformed from a humble nation into the seconding largest economic entity with global influence. Concurrently, Chinese Christianity has emerged from the ruins of the Cultural Revolution as a remnant community into a formidable force of tens of millions of followers with potential impact in global Christianity. Their visibility has increased all while existing in an environment hostile to religion. Both the PRC and Church in China are rather new in their respective self-identities as both have experienced rapid development often outpacing any previous experiences one could rely upon.

China, now flexing its muscles in different parts of the world, has increasingly made its mark in those regions. However, such outward venturing is new to China, and the Chinese authority has constantly adjusted to balance Sinophilia and Sinophobia tensions in the international community to exercise its global influence. Likewise, Christianity in China now finds its identity both in Chinese society and in the global Christian world. The Church in China has numerical strength, just as China has economic power.

However, the real strength of a nation lies not in its wealth or armaments but also in moral integrity and universal values such as honouring human rights, equality, and sharing. The ecclesial community must focus not only on the size of its followers but also on spiritual maturity evidenced by humility, servanthood, justice, and compassion. The Church in China must embark on a journey of consolidating its ecclesial community in terms of spiritual formation, striving for Christian unity, identifying with its cultural milieu, and balancing tensions between Chinese nationalistic aspirations and developing a vision on God's Kingdom beyond ethnicity and nationality. If it does not do these things, then it could end up falling into many fragmented groups squabbling among themselves with little more than some ethno-centric ecclesial modes to share with others, despite any relevancy they may have to others beyond the Chinese milieu.

Lastly, in the context of China, the Christian population is merely a small percentage of the general population, and more than 90 percent remain unreached – the largest single geopolitical entity of the global unreached population. China itself is already the biggest mission challenge the Church in China faces. China has the largest aging population with a rapid decrease in the youth population – due to the prolonged One-Child Policy – and this will negatively impact future civil and ecclesial society structures. Future leaders will have to face

caring for an increasingly aging population as well as a highly distorted gender ratio. Many Asian countries with low birth rates, such as Korea, Singapore, Japan, and Taiwan, face similar challenges with varying degrees of magnitude. This population issue presents an impending national socio-political challenge for China far beyond the scope of this chapter, yet it carries detrimental consequences for Chinese society.

These questions remain: will the Church in China continue to develop as a vibrant ecclesial community with an increasing number of believers that outpace the rate of population growth? Or will the Church in China gradually become a religious club for the elderly with only a few youth seen among its rank and file as observed in many churches of Christianised nations in the West? We shall have a better idea in 2033, if we shall live that long, and if Christ has not yet returned.

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Abstract

This paper will look at the challenges ahead for the Church in China and provide a general orientation of Xi Jinping's governance, particularly those elements with direct bearing on the present state of the Church. It will follow by highlighting several issues which would perceive as major challenges facing the Church in China in the coming decade: Ecclesial manifestation and internalization of faith, Christian Unity, Sinicization: Christianity in China or Chinese Christianity, and lastly Missiology, Diasporas and nationalistic sentiment.