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Introduction

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.”¹

URBANIZATION IS INDELIBLY REDRAWING the landscape of China, geographically, as well as socially. A prominent feature of China’s meteoric rise in this century, the unprecedented growth of its cities has in many ways been the driving force behind China’s extraordinary economic growth and development. New manufacturing centers springing up in eastern and southern China became magnets for foreign investment in the nation’s cities, both old and new, fueling advances in technology, education, and infrastructure development. Those same cities drew hundreds of thousands of peasants into this whirlwind of economic activity, with migrant workers making possible China’s industrial boom and the massive building projects that have been essential to the nation’s rise.

Another phenomenon has also emerged, somewhat unexpectedly, as a prominent feature of China’s rise. The growth of religion, in particular Christianity, has caught the attention of journalists and scholars alike as they have explored the various facets of China’s rapidly changing society. From *Jesus in Beijing* by former *Time* magazine Beijing bureau chief David Aikman² to Gerda Wielander’s *Christian Values in Communist China*³

1. Matthew 5:14.
2. Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*.
3. Wielander, *Christian Values*.

China's Urban Christians

a decade later, observers have endeavored to interpret the surprising re-emergence of Christianity following decades of harsh persecution and to anticipate how this growing movement might affect China's future. Both Lian Xi⁴ and Daniel Bays⁵ have put today's church growth into historical context, showing the continuities between Christian life in the current era and the development of the church in China before 1949. Liao Yiwu's vivid retelling of the stories of individual believers provides insights into how the church withstood formidable obstacles to become a vibrant social force in many parts of China.⁶ Carol Hamrin and Jason Kindopp,⁷ and more recently Timothy Conkling,⁸ have examined how Christians face repression by China's authoritarian regime. In their investigation into China's "religious awakening," Rodney Stark and Wang Xiuhu used statistical analysis to substantiate claims of Christianity's rapid growth—from just over one million Protestants and 3.2 million Catholics in 1950 to slightly over 60 million Christians by 2007—and to show how this growth is taking place among both rural peasants and the well-educated in China (albeit for different reasons).⁹

This book is an attempt to bring together these two facets of China's rise—urbanization and the emergence of a significant and growing Christian community. Although contemporary studies of Christianity in China have acknowledged the role of urbanization as a component of the overall social landscape, the specific implications of urbanization for the church and, conversely, of Christianity for the city, have received comparatively little attention. The purpose of this book is to explore how the church in China perceives the challenges posed by its new urban context and to examine its proposed means of responding to these challenges. "Church" here is used in the broad sense to refer to the community of Christians in China. The specific focus will be on Protestant Christianity, although parallels to much of what is taking place in urban Protestant communities may also be found among Catholic believers, in both the registered church under the Catholic Patriotic Association and in the unregistered churches.

4. Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*.

5. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*.

6. Liao, *God is Red*.

7. Hamrin and Kindopp, *God and Caesar in China*.

8. Conkling, *Mobilized Merchants—Patriotic Martyrs*.

9. Stark and Wang, *A Star in the East*.

AN INCOMPLETE NARRATIVE

In contrast to much contemporary literature on Christianity in China, the present study does not see the church's current challenges as being primarily political in nature. Much of this literature positions the church as one of many unofficial social groupings that stand outside the direct reach of—and sometimes in opposition to—the authoritarian party-state. Since the party-state is officially atheistic, religious groups are seen as posing a particular threat to the regime. Their allegiance to a power other than that of the regime threatens the party-state's authoritarian grip on society; thus religious believers have been suspect in the eyes of China's leaders and have historically been objects of repression.¹⁰ This “David vs. Goliath” view of the church-state relationship has given rise to a prevailing “persecution” narrative, which paints a picture of a struggling church victimized by an all-powerful state bent on its demise.¹¹

As will be seen in chapter eight, many of the assumptions underlying this narrative remain valid. The boundaries of acceptable Christian activity are still set by the regime and are subject to change. In recent decades, however, these boundaries have loosened considerably. In this environment the prevailing “persecution” narrative does not begin to tell the whole story, nor does it do justice to the intricate and multi-faceted reality of most Christians in China today. While intense persecution was the norm during the Cultural Revolution, the situation for the church during the past thirty years has been less clear-cut and much more complex as the regime's attention has moved from ideological purity to economic development.

The central issue for China's Christians has shifted from freedom of belief to freedom of association.¹² Those who choose to organize in ways that are perceived as threatening to the regime risk reprisal. Included among these are Christians who, whether through direct confrontation or through working creatively within the system, seek political change that will allow the church to fulfill what they see as its proper role in Chinese society. Other Christians in China are active in building civil society institutions, with many playing a leading role in China's nascent NGO sector.¹³

10. “Cracks in the atheist edifice.”

11. Fulton, “In Their Own Words,” 99–100.

12. Carol Lee Hamrin, email message to author, June 17, 2015.

13. “Cracks in the Atheist Edifice.”

CHALLENGES OF A CHANGING URBAN ENVIRONMENT

For most of China's Christians, however, political and social change are not the priority. The challenges they face lie much closer to home, as China's Christians seek to define how the church should function in its new urban environment. Raising up a new generation of qualified leadership, managing church affairs, maintaining the integrity of the faith amidst an onslaught of secularizing forces, meeting the practical needs of believers, and articulating the church's mission in a manner relevant to its urban context are among the issues that are top-of-mind for Christians in China today.

The exploration of this agenda suggests the following questions:

- How have church structures changed as the church has moved from a primarily rural to an urban setting?
- What kind of church leadership is emerging?
- Given the church's urban setting, how has the church's mission changed in the minds of its leaders?
- How do China's Christians see the church relating to China's urban society?
- How might Christians in China be expected to engage with the global Christian community?

The exploration begins by examining the backdrop of widespread demographic, social, and cultural change against which the challenges facing China's Christians are to be viewed, thus laying the groundwork for addressing these challenges in detail in later chapters. Chapter three shows how the church's shift is both geographical and generational; together these changes have resulted in a transformation of the church that encompasses its leadership, structure, physical location, and position in society. Chapter four examines how the shifts explored earlier have created a new environment of comparative openness in which the greatest threats facing the church are not political but social and cultural, posing new challenges to the individual and community life of Christians in China. Chapter five looks at how Christians perceive, and seek to respond to, widely recognized social problems that have accompanied decades of rapid change absent a shared moral and ethical system. Amidst this "crisis of faith," many among China's Christians see an imperative for social engagement, which takes multiple forms in China's urban context.

As China's opening has resulted in greater integration with the international community, Chinese believers are beginning to explore their role in the global community of faith, particularly in the task of world evangelization. Chapter six surveys the motivations and activities surrounding this conscious move outward. Chapter seven takes a look at both the new opportunities for, and obstacles to, unity within the church that are brought about by increased social openness and a new generation of leaders who see as a priority their ability to work together. Standing against this impetus for unity are an underlying culture of mistrust and the prospect of the church dividing along denominational or theological lines. The book concludes by revisiting the thesis that the most formidable challenges facing Christians in China have more to do with the church's changing social and cultural environment than they do with direct political pressure.

LISTENING TO THE CHINESE CHURCH

Although a wide variety of academic and popular sources are consulted in order to fill out this picture of China's urban church, throughout the book there is a conscious attempt to hear from the church itself and to allow individual Christians in China to tell their story. Much of this documentary material has come through dozens of conversations and interviews with Chinese Christians. In addition, *Chinese Church Voices*, an online project directed by my ChinaSource colleague Joann Pittman, has been an invaluable source for articles, sermons, and social media postings by Christians in China. The very existence of a vibrant online Christian community in China, which provides the source material for *Chinese Church Voices*, is but one evidence of the immense change brought about through the past two decades of massive urbanization. This context of change, providing the backdrop for the unfolding story of China's urban church, is the starting point for a look into the lives of those who are building the city on a hill.