

# The Three-Self Controversy in Chinese Adventism

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## ABSTRACT

In China, due to the special political environments, government policy always plays an important role in the church affairs and the church-state relation is highly interwoven through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), a special politico-religious agency created by the government. The nature of the TSPM is clear for many Christian leaders, but just how to deal with it produces different opinions among denominations and within the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church. It sometimes creates many missiological and ecclesiastical problems like sharp conflicts among church leaders and even schisms in the SDA Church history.

This article aims to demonstrate the phenomenon of the Three-Self controversy among the Chinese Adventists through a historical review, to analyze its origin and development under certain historical, cultural and political settings, the different attitudes among the SDA Church leaders and the resulting controversy thereof, and to tell the current crisis and future tendency of the church-state relationship under the Three-Self's supervision. It is suggested that the SDA Church as a whole should form a unified understanding, not necessarily a policy, to deal with this issue in the middle way, neither violating the state's law and regulations nor being too dependent on the Three-Self, in order to survive better in case of trouble.

Keywords: Three-Self Patriotic Movement, Three-Self Controversy, Church-State Relation

## Introduction

The development of Chinese Christianity has experienced more vicissitudes than many other countries due to its special cultural, social and political environments, among which government policy always plays a prominent role in religious life. Such characteristics sometimes make Chinese Christianity a hybrid of religion and politics, tied by the highly interwoven church-state relation. The TSPM is a political device created by the government to control Christianity, and has become an important issue in the church affairs.

The nature of the TSPM is clear for most of church leaders in China, but just how to deal with the church-state relation produces different opinions among denominations. Even within the SDA Church, opinions are quite different. The SDA Church could be divided into three groups based on this issue: the Three-Self Church, the Registered Church and the Unregistered Church.

This article will demonstrate the phenomenon of the Three-Self controversy among Chinese Adventists, to analyze its origin and development under a certain socio-political background, the different attitudes among the SDA Church leaders and the resulting controversy thereof, and the future tendency of the church-state relation within the Three-Self framework. It also aims at illustrating the proper way to which the SDA Church, as the remnant, should go under this special socio-political environment.

## The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and Xenophobia

### Historical Background: The Reason for Xenophobia

For a long time in ancient Chinese history, the ruling class carried out the agriculture-oriented social policy to sustain its self-sufficient economic mode. Agriculture was regarded as the foundation of social existence, while industry and commerce were restrained. People believed that China was super-abundant in products thus the economic and cultural exchange with other countries was unnecessary. Furthermore, the ruling class was afraid that this kind of foreign exchange would threaten the country's sovereignty, society and its ruling position. This seclusionism was revealed to the world when the Jesuits missionaries tried to knock the door of China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> From then on, batches of Catholic missionaries came one after another, not only opened the door of China, but had deep influence upon the royalty of Qing Court. However, this short-lived prosperity of the Sino-foreign exchange was extinguished by Emperor Kangxi in the Rite Controversy of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The following emperors succeeded this seclusive policy and resisted the foreign cultural invasion until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Western military powers opened the door of China by force.

In 1807, the first Protestant missionary Robert Morrison came to China, and the door for Christianity was gradually opened in this long sealed-in country since then. In 1840, the breakout of the Opium War accelerated this process. Unfortunately, the early period of the development of Protestantism was always along with the illegal opium trade and Unequal Treaties between China and the Western military powers.<sup>3</sup> The missionaries were not only the beneficiaries of the results, but some were active participants in it.<sup>4</sup> One of them was Karl Gutzlaff.<sup>5</sup> People in the areas where he served viewed him with a "combination of fear and awe."<sup>6</sup> Such characteristics made the Chinese people misunderstand of the nature of mission work and regard it as a tool of imperialistic invasion.<sup>7</sup> Thus the sentiment of anti-Christianity was formed among people and made Christianity the direct target of cruel violence during

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: AD 600 to 2000* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius, 2007), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Arthur Waley, *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1958); Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jessie Gregory Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F. A. Gutzlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827-1852* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gu Changsheng, *Chuanjiaoshi Yu Jindai Zhongguo* (The Missionaries and Modern China), (Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe, 2013), preface.

the last four decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> This could be seen through the Boxer Rebellion, when about 250 missionaries and 30,000 Chinese Christians were slaughtered, some in a gruesome manner.<sup>9</sup>

However, this tragic event directly resulted in the Eight Power Allied Force's invasion to suppress the rebellion and the further collapse of Qing Dynasty. Many Confucian elites started the social reform in order to find a way to save China and thus proclaimed the coming of Chinese "Golden Age" of Christian expansion,<sup>10</sup> in which Adventism reached Mainland China in 1902 when the first official missionary JN Anderson was sent by the General Conference to China. In the age of turmoil and suffering mixed with the sentiment of anti-Christianity, the SDA Church started its journey of development in this country.

### Social and Cultural Conflicts

The social repercussions aroused by the entrance of Protestantism along with the military invasion had its inextricable root not only in the economic-political background, but also in the ingrained Chinese culture, which made a big rebound when facing the other cultures' challenge. Not like the former, which served at best the external reason, the cultural element had its invisible but overwhelming power for social movements. The social and cultural conflicts between China and the Western gradually developed into a long-term struggle in Chinese society, in which Christianity was always a sufferer.

As early as in Spring and Autumn Period (770BC-476BC), there was already some documental materials showing the xenophobic spirit among the ancient Chinese people. The most famous one was "those who are not our kin are sure to be a different heart" (*fei wo zu lei, qi xin bi yi*).<sup>11</sup> But this thought was just the outcome of many years' wars at that time, not reflecting the real Chinese original culture. Concerning Chinese original culture, it is a common sense for many Chinese Christians that the ancient Chinese worshiped the true God of Israel, and this belief was represented in the Chinese Characters.<sup>12</sup> Based on this premise, Chinese people should have deeper understanding on the Bible and welcome Christianity because of the common points shared by the Bible and Chinese. Yet after 2500 years' decline, during the time of Warring States,<sup>13</sup> "Purity and simplicity vanished. Anarchy and bloodshed were encouraged."<sup>14</sup> According to Yuan ZhiMing, a famous political dissenter of China, "God's history with Israel has its parallel in God's history with China."<sup>15</sup> Just as the Israelites betrayed God, the Chinese people did the same.

As a result of Chinese resistance against God in ancient times, Confucianism eventually took the place of Biblical religion, and became the mainstream of Chinese culture for more than two thousand years.

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<sup>8</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 66.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Zuo Qiuming, *Zuo Zhuan*, Chenggong Si Nian (The fourth year of King Cheng).

<sup>12</sup> cf. C.H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson, *The Discovery of Genesis*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> This period lasted 255 years from 476 BC to 221 BC, in which seven states fought each other, causing the turbulence and unsafe in society, until the state of Qin united China in 221 BC.

<sup>14</sup> Tobias Brandner, "Trying to Make Sense of History: Chinese Christian tradition of countercultural belief and their theological and political interpretation of past and present history," in *Christianity in Contemporary China*, ed. Francis Khek Gee Lim, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Since it “possessed a well-established cultural category” “long before the coming of Christianity,” this ideology had a strong sentiment against other countries’ culture that may be defined as “anti-foreignism,”<sup>16</sup> especially anti-Christianity.

### The Sino-Western Relation inside Church

The conflicts between China and the Western were displayed not only in the economic-political and cultural level, but also inside church as well. For a long time, the foreign missionaries and Chinese workers inside church were of unequal status. The missionaries always regarded themselves as superior to their Chinese fellow-worker, and hoped to control every resource of the church, especially the leadership.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, this western-led mode gradually became an ingrained tradition in the missionaries’ mind that did not allow any challenge from the native workers. “The view of many Chinese was that missionaries were religious leaders of the Chinese church, not because they are best qualified, but as a historical holdover from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>18</sup> This unequal relation had inevitably caused “some tense”<sup>19</sup> inside the church, and even sharp conflicts. The indigenous and independent movements among the Protestant churches during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were the result of such contradiction. Soon afterwards in the 1950s, when Communist China launched the TSPM, which mainly targeted at cutting the relationship between Chinese church and foreign missionaries, this long-term disharmony partly led most of the Protestant churches to accept the Three-Self principle.

The same situation occurred in the SDA Church since its organization was highly “centralized and hierarchical,” and “most regional unions were headed by missionaries.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, “this rigid hierarchy created a subordinate relationship between the missionaries and Chinese staff.”<sup>21</sup> This situation, especially the estrangement between missionaries and Chinese workers, was also echoed by some Chinese senior pastors who had experienced the church institutional work in the missionaries’ era.<sup>22</sup> These characteristics of organization had placed the SDA Church at the forefront of brutal attacks when Communism swept over China, because of its tight relationship with foreign countries, especially the United States.

### When Christianity Encountered Communist

The October Revolution of Russia in 1917 changed the history of China, because it brought the Communism into this pitiful-torn and the mainstream-values-lost country. People were fed up with Confucianism because it did not bring prosperity to China, and disappointed with western Capitalism

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<sup>16</sup> Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 67, 72, 80, 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Tse-Hei Lee and Christie Chui-Shan Chow, “Christian Revival from Within: Seventh-day Adventism in China,” in *Christianity in Contemporary China*, ed. Francis Khek Gee Lim, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> This is also the finding of several interviews with some senior Chinese pastors in the different parts of China. They are all conservative Adventists and loyal to the organization, but saw some problems in their ministry with the foreign missionaries.

which proclaimed science and democracy that Chinese people ever eagerly pursued in the New Cultural Movement, because Capitalism did not bring benefits to China either, on the contrary it brought more pain and sorrow after World War I. As a result, the Communist ideology found favor with Chinese people who urgently needed the salvation of nation, and soon became prosperous in the whole country. The tragedy of the three batches of anti-Christianity movements from 1922 to 1928 were ignited just by “nationalistic fervor” and “Bolshevist influence,”<sup>23</sup> that is, Communist influence.

All the anti-Christianity sentiments reached their climax in 1949, when the Communist Party took power in China. Besides its culture elements, now the political reason played a more important role. Unlike Islam, another external religion in China, Christianity tried to proselytize the Chinese people in its religious practice, hence posed an “ethico-political threat”, and became an “uneasy presence.”<sup>24</sup> What’s more, people regarded Christianity as a tool of Western imperialist, as mentioned by Premier Minister Zhou Enlai:

“It is the wicked imperialists who use the church as their tool of aggression...we express our wish to expose US imperialism, which during the past period of over a hundred years has made use of the church’s work in evangelism and cultural activities to carry out its sinister policy. In our Manifesto of September 1950, we emphasized the breaking off of relations between the church in China and imperialism, the purging from the church of all imperialistic influence”<sup>25</sup>

This was the Communist Party’s standpoint about Christianity in the early 1950s, when the TSPM was launched.

## The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Communist Persecution

### The Origin of Three-Self Principle and Its Application in Communist China

Not long after the Communist Party took power in China, the Korean War broke out in June 1950. In order to confront the blockage of “imperialism,” the Chinese government decided to take some strong measures to cut any relationship with “imperialism” in any part of society. The TSPM was thus launched in July 1950.

The term “Three-Self” was originally coined by Rufus Anderson, the foreign secretary of the American board of commissioners for foreign missions, and Henry Venn, the general secretary of the church ministry society. It was designed to establish “genuinely native churches in the mission field.”<sup>26</sup> This principle promoted the Protestant independent movements in 1920s, and was adopted by the Japanese

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel H. Bays, ed. *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1996), 294.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Khok Gee Lim, “Shield of Faith” in *Christianity in Contemporary China*, ed. Francis Khok Gee Lim, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Donald E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China: A Documentary History*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), 98.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Tze Ming Ng, “From Christianity in China to Chinese Christianity,” in *Christianity in Contemporary China*, 35.

army in World War II to control Chinese churches in the occupied areas. After 1949, in order to comply with the tendency of indigenous process and the Chinese special political, cultural, and social background, this principle was again chosen by the Chinese government to implement its policy to cut the religious relationship with other countries, and renamed it as the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement.”<sup>27</sup>

This movement aimed to eradicate the power and influence of “imperialism” inside church on the one side, and to integrate all Christian denominations under the Communist Party’s control on the other. Self-governance means independence from foreign influence in church affairs; self-support means independent finance; and self propagation means independent mission activities. Those who refused to accept these principles would be persecuted.

At that special historical juncture, probably all the criticism and rebuke would be pointed to Communism for its hegemony. But the reality was that both the Chinese church leaders in the independent movements and the Japanese army in his controlling China ever adopted a similar way to manage the Chinese church. According to Daniel Bays, what the Japanese did had “foreshadowed, and perhaps influenced, the Communist state’s approach to subordinating Christianity to its own hegemonic goals.”<sup>28</sup> So the TSPM was not an isolated event, but an inevitable tendency and outcome of the time in historical continuity. Furthermore, the Communist Party had a mass foundation for launching the TSPM and was in “high prestige” and genuinely supported by many Chinese at that time, including the Christians.<sup>29</sup> Many Christians wanted to show their patriotism through joining the TSPM, although they were under the high political pressure. Such understanding constitutes the first of the most important two points to evaluate the church policy on the TSPM and its controversy.

### The Chinese SDA Church and the TSPM

After the Communist Party came into power, Branson William Henry, the former president of the SDA Church China Division, said in January 1950:

“The full burden of the work in China must now rest upon our national brethren without the assistance of our foreign mission staff, and they will need our prayer and encouragement. We have full confidence, however, that God will lead them and that He will cause His work to prosper under their leadership.”<sup>30</sup>

Soon afterwards, the missionary-led China Division was dissolved, the Chinese SDA Church accepted the Three-Self principle,<sup>31</sup> and formed its own indigenized organization.

After the declaration of the Christian Manifesto in July 1950,<sup>32</sup> the SDA Church’s indigenized organization and leadership was dissolved further by the government. In 1951 the TSPM sent a working team into the

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<sup>27</sup> Lee and Chow, “Christian revival from Within,” 48.

<sup>28</sup> Bays, *Christianity in China*, 319.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Hunter and Kim Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University, 1993), 23. Cf. John Bryan Starr, *Understanding China: A Guide to China’s Economy, History, and Political Culture*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1997), 63.

<sup>30</sup> W. H. Branson, “Change in Division Headquarters,” *The China Division Reporter*, Hong Kong, January, 1950, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Young, 119.

Adventist headquarters in Shanghai. “The team created a new organization, the Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Three-Self Reform and Accusation Committee, to undermine the existing church leadership.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, it was a puppet organization controlled by the government.

In 1954, the church leaders tried to reorganize the Adventist churches all around the country and establish the SDA Church “Chinese General Conference.” This proposal was approved by the government, and in August 1955, under the principle of Three-Self, the SDA Church “Chinese General Conference” was established. This seeming victory of the church toward the atheistic authorities was short-lived, and was just a sudden spurt of activity before it collapsed. In the following Anti-Rightist Campaign, this organization was totally destroyed, and has not been restored until this day.

### The Anti-Rightist Campaign

From 1957, a series of campaigns were launched to purge the “rightist” within the party and society. “Rightist” meant those intellectuals who favored the capitalism and were against collectivization. The slogan of this campaign was to “promote the proletariat,” and “eradicate the capitalism,” in which Christianity belonged to the latter. Thus this period was called the “period of eradicating the church,” during which the church situation further deteriorated. Many church pastors and leaders were defined as “rightists” and jailed, and church activities were prohibited.

The SDA Church “Chinese General Conference” was totally banned in September 1958.<sup>34</sup> From then on, church members went underground for secret worship and the House Church Movement was thus developed. In order to survive the persecution, the SDA Church had to adjust its strategy.<sup>35</sup>

### The Destruction of Three-Self in the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution had significantly affected the country economically and socially. It was nominally a revolution of culture, but was de-facto a massive social-political movement. The whole country was totally paralyzed by the Red Guard, whole society was in chaos, and all the cultures except Communism were trampled down from 1966 to 1976. This ten years’ catastrophe made millions of people be persecuted and killed by the violent factional struggles, including the Christians. “Nearly all visible and institutional expressions of faith were either destroyed or removed from the scene.”<sup>36</sup>

If we say that the TSPM and the Anti-Rightist Campaign were the preparatory stage of government to eradicate all religions, especially Christianity, then the Cultural Revolution would be the culmination of this series of movements. We can easily find their difference in degree.<sup>37</sup> For the TSPM, it tried to eradicate denominations among Christianity, and unite churches under the state’s governance, and

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<sup>32</sup> The full title is: Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China.

<sup>33</sup> Lee and Chow, “Christian revival from Within,” 49.

<sup>34</sup> Young, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Yujing, Zhu, *State Rule, Local Politics, and Christian in Wenzhou*, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2012), 96.

<sup>36</sup> Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China’s United Front* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 180.

<sup>37</sup> For the content of following statement, please reference Zhu, 98-103.

persecution was only imposed to those who refused to join the TSPM. For the Anti-Rightist Campaign, church pastors and clergies were persecuted, no matter whether joined the TSPM or not, and the persecution was usually from the government.

But during the Cultural Revolution, Christianity was banned, and the church activities were totally prohibited. All the church members were persecuted, and even the TSPM organization itself could not escape. Before the Cultural Revolution, Christians were persecuted as “counter-revolutionary,” “rightists” or other accusations, but they were not denounced as Christians directly. During the Cultural Revolution, being a Christian itself became a direct reason for persecution.<sup>38</sup> The escalation of persecution through these three movements is evident. The TSPM is just the first step and an elaborate strategy taken by the government to eradicate Christianity. Whatever policy formulated by the TSPM is from the atheist Communist Party’s perspective, whose ultimate goal is to eradicate any religion. So there is no any quidditative benefit church can reckon on by clinging to it. Such understanding constitutes the second of the most important two points to evaluate the church policy on the TSPM and its controversy.

## The Three-Self Controversy

### The SDA Church’s Attitude: Appliance with State Policy

When the TSPM swept over Christianity in China, the SDA Church was one of the earliest denominations that accepted the state’s policy. It was also the first one that launched a series of accusation meetings among the Protestant churches.<sup>39</sup> Through denouncing and accusing publically the evil of the former SDA Church organization in China and the General Conference, many church leaders were imprisoned one after another, and the SDA Church indigenized organization and personnel were undermined and replaced gradually by those who were pro-Communist. This was the first personnel purge inside the SDA Church, which resulted in the birth of a puppet organization controlled by the government.

Since the main leaders of the Chinese SDA Church, although many of them were just puppets, accepted the Three-Self, the whole denomination followed this step without much opposition. But there were still some different voices coming from the grass-roots level of local churches, which scattered in Wenzhou, Hubei, and other parts of China. These churches became what we called house churches in the open era and they asserted that the SDA Church in China had been apostate for joining the Three-Self and they were the true remnants. Despite all this, the controversy at that time was tiny and secret due to little opposition inside and high pressure of political environment outside. But the seed of controversy had already been laid from that time on.

### Other Denominations’ Attitudes

Like the SDA Church, the majority of Protestant churches accepted the TSPM. However, there were some independent church leaders who refused to join it.<sup>40</sup> For instance, Watchman Nee, the founder of

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Zhu, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Young, 120.

<sup>40</sup> At that time about one fifth to fourth Christians belonged to independent churches.



Little Flock, and his followers refused to be subject to the control of the Maoist state,<sup>41</sup> and they became a true house church. He was arrested, and his “Little Flock had no choice but to confront the mighty Communist state.”<sup>42</sup> They subjected themselves “directly under the authority of Jesus Christ rather than any external organization.”<sup>43</sup> Other independent church leaders like Wang Mingdao,<sup>44</sup> also rejected the TSPM until his death in 1991. Both of them believed they had already carried out the Three-Self Principle from the very beginning and there was no need to join another so-called “Three-Self” organization which was not real Three-Self. Therefore a vigorous house church movement started in China.

### The Roman Catholic Church’s Attitude

Unlike the Protestant Churches, the Roman Catholic Church from the very beginning resisted in joining the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), the TSPM equivalence.<sup>45</sup> There were several severe controversies and even sharp conflicts between Beijing and Vatican. The Catholics were severely persecuted along with many bishops and priests who were loyal to the Vatican, the most famous one of whom was Bishop Gong Ping Mei.<sup>46</sup>

### The Controversy in the Open Era

After the Cultural Revolution, China implemented a reform and opening policy, and the church development entered into a new era. In 1980, the TSPM Committee was resumed, continuing its work of coordination between the state and church. The previous hidden controversy upon it thus emerged and became intense and sharp, and even became the cause of the SDA Church’s schisms in some places.

The typical example was the Wilderness Church Movement started from Wenzhou area, which is located in southeast of China and known as Jerusalem of China, within the SDA Church in the year 1985. This was the second schism of the SDA church in this area. The reason was that an SDA church pastor was ordained by Sunday church pastors (belonging to Three-Self) and his church joined the TSPM. It meant this church had to “follow many regulations such as restricting religious activities in specific areas, accepting the state ordination of church ministers, reporting church memberships to the government, submitting the budgets to the Three-Self officials, rejecting Seventh-day Adventism and complying with the post-denominational emphasis of Three-Self Patriotic Movement.”<sup>47</sup>

Such action aroused some of the SDA Church leaders, and they immediately launched a nationwide campaign against those Adventists’ accepting the Three-Self in various provinces. Adventists who

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<sup>41</sup> Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Watchman Nee and Little Flock Movement in Mao’s Era,” *Church History*, March 2005, 74-76.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Wang Mingdao was regarded as the representative of Chinese independent church. From the very beginning until last, he refused to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 169-175.

<sup>46</sup> For the concrete information, see Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> Lee and Chow, “Christian revival from Within,” 51-52.

followed this doctrine separated themselves from their original churches and called themselves as the Wilderness Church.<sup>48</sup>

From the year 2000, another schism broke out within the Wilderness Church due to the issue of registration by the Three-Self. Some leaders accepted to register their churches with the local government to avoid the tense relationship with the state, which meant accepting the TSPM and having the seal of it on their documents. This action was regarded as apostate for some conservative leaders, and eventually led to another schism in 2008.

### Three Kinds of the SDA Church in General

According to the different attitudes toward the TSPM, the Chinese SDA Church can be divided into three basic categories: the Three-Self Church, the Registered Church and the Unregistered Church.

The first two are basically the same in legal status since both of them accept the TSPM principles and get registered with government. The difference is that the Three-Self church always actively participates in political affairs like holding the official position in the TSPM Committee or governmental departments. But the Registered Church leaders always deny that they belong to the Three-Self even though they registered the church under its name, because they usually have no interest in the political affairs. They register the church just “in order to cultivate patronage ties with local officials for protection.”<sup>49</sup> This kind of church is accepting the Three-Self in form but rejecting it in action.

However, the Unregistered Church is illegal according to the Chinese laws and, it is totally different from the former two categories in the legal status. It rejects any kind of registration under the TSPM framework and regards all Registered Churches as apostate.

## Analysis and Evaluation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement

### The Nature of Three-Self Patriotic Movement

The original concept of Three-Self was from Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn in 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the aim to build a genuinely native and indigenized church in the mission field.<sup>50</sup> This principle is good in nature for any mission field to promote the gospel. However, in Chinese missionary’s era, it had never been applied. The missionaries believed that “China needed not only Christ, but the norms of Western culture as well,” and they “rejected the views” of Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn.<sup>51</sup>

After the Communist Party took power in 1949, it applied the Three-Self principle into Chinese Christianity in order to cut its relationship with other countries and control it, and renamed it as the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement.” The phrasing here is very subtle. “Three-Self” means cutting any

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Tze Ming Ng, “From Christianity in China to Chinese Christianity” in *Christianity in Contemporary China*, ed. Francis Khek Gee Lim, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 71.

relationship with other countries; “Patriotic” means “loving the country, nation or state,” of which “love the state” is prominent. That is, love the party-state.<sup>52</sup> So, the full meaning of “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” is to cut the relationship with other countries, and subject Christianity under the Communist Party’s control. The ultimate goal of the TSPM is to eradicate Christianity thoroughly.

### The Influence of the TSPM upon Christianity

Under the control of the Communist Party, Christianity in China could not genuinely realize the principle of Three-Self even with the name “Three-Self.” On the contrary, it was persecuted and led to perish through this agency of the Party. In Chinese mission history, only during the Cultural Revolution, did the Chinese church truly realize “Three-Self” because there were no missionaries, and the TSPM was dissolved. When all the missionaries in other countries thought that Chinese church would disappear, to everyone’s surprise, it increased 5-6 times in number after this ten years’ catastrophe.<sup>53</sup> Such rapid development laid the foundation of the prosperity of Chinese Christianity today.

After the Cultural Revolution, the TSPM Committee was resumed, together with the China Christian Council (CCC). They were called *lianghui* (Two Committees), which were to control Christianity. However, the state found itself unable to use this pair of bodies as it had hoped.<sup>54</sup> The reason lies in the fact that leaders of this agency were regarded as the enmity of believers in the 1950s by their politicized, “leftist” behavior, yet now were back in power again.<sup>55</sup> In many Christians’ eyes, “TSPM will only restrict the growth of the church and that to join it would be to compromise their faith.”<sup>56</sup> To join it or not, has been a long-term controversy even in Protestantism.

### Solution for the Three-Self Controversy

As far as the pure faith is concerned, it seems that the Communist Party-led TSPM does not fit the biblical principle because it requires the Christians to “love the Party,” an atheist one, and accept its eradicating-Christianity-targeted policy. It means doing or practicing the religion according to the Party’s will. It is impossible and totally contradictory between love the church and love the Party at the same time, because the Party is atheist and regards the church superstitious and will disappear when the society develops. How can a Christian mix the faith of God with the unbelief of the atheist party? This is the crux where the Three-Self controversy inside the SDA Church occurred. Its nature reflects the different perspectives upon the church-state relation among the church leaders. How to maintain the principle of separation of the church from the state while still keep the atheistic state’s law is the real question.

In order to analyze and solve this controversy, the suggested two important points mentioned above will be helpful. On the one hand, the event like launching the TSPM was not done only by the Communist

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<sup>52</sup> Carsten T. Vala, “Protestan Reactions to the Nationalism agenda in Contemporary China” in *Christianity in Contemporary China*, ed. Francis Khok Gee Lim, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 59-70.

<sup>53</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 179, 186.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Adeney, H. David. *China: The Church's Long March*. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985), 18.

Party in Chinese church history, and it was in some sense a historical and cultural necessity. Even though the dominator was the atheist party and it pushed this movement into an extreme way, the church could still accept it with the principle of unconditional love while keeping the commandments of God. On the other hand, since the nature of the TSPM is not for developing the church, but just accelerating to destroy it, too much clinging to the TSPM means asking for trouble in the church affairs.

Moreover, much of Christianity's future in China would depend on the political elements.<sup>57</sup> Opposing publically the state's policy would be unnecessary and make the church incur losses. Therefore, the mainstream of the Chinese SDA Church follow the middle way: to register the church with local government by accepting and obeying the TSPM in form while practicing the religion and faith according to the Bible in action, in order to carry out the religious activities more effectively in society and reduce the tense relationship with the state. Such practice keeps church in the legal status, which is also the requirements of the Bible (Rom 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1Peter 2:13), and meanwhile does not violate the principle of separating church from the state.

It is undeniable that there are still many SDA churches in China that do not accept the TSPM and still criticize those churches which have accepted it. Such kind of noncooperation with the TSPM should be respected due to some special historical and experiential reasons. While the suggestion is still that the church should follow the Biblical teaching that "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right." (1 Peter 2:13-14) At least the criticism by either side should be avoided to maintain the unity of the Chinese SDA Church.

In another aspect, however, there are some subtle changes among the SDA churches which have been registered that more and more church leaders get interested in the TSPM affairs and its official position, while neglecting the real welfare of their own churches. The TSPM sometimes becomes the battle field of the personnel competition inside the church. The tendency is that the controversy of whether the SDA Church can join the TSPM or not has given way to how a church leader can get a good position in it. This is a new crisis among the Chinese SDA churches.

Either taking the extreme way to reject the TSPM, or participating too much in it, is not the proper way for the SDA Church and its faith to deal with the church-state relation. Although the external Three-Self controversy among the SDA churches has been reduced recently, the internal controversy within the statement of the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" itself should be still an alarm for Adventists, in order to practice their faith in the middle way under such instable and uncertain state's policies.

### Re-exam the Church Policy

The SDA Church was one of the earliest churches that accepted the TSPM and the first one that carried out the accusation meetings to denounce the General Conference and missionaries. Such facts are sometimes ignored by church leaders and considered sensitive to discuss. For a long time, the SDA

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<sup>57</sup> Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 112.

Church's attitude towards the TSPM has been vague. It is not suggested to oppose the state's policy, but it really needs to understand the TSPM's nature and know the proper way to deal with it.

In history of the Chinese SDA Church, it ever stood closely to the TSPM, and even the pioneer in the accusation meetings, but this "intimate" relationship could not save the church during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. The SDA Church was still suffered, like those who were strongly against the TSPM. Its organization was destroyed by compromising the faith while the other churches which refused the TSPM were destroyed by remaining faithful and unyielding. Although the compromised SDA Church at that time was just a puppet one, the fact was still clear that the TSPM could not protect the church in time of trouble, on the contrary, it was a tool used by the atheist party to accelerate the destruction of the church. Staying too close to it means going beyond the biblical principle of obeying the government. It is, in some sense, the alliance between the church and state, which is against the SDA Church's principle.

## Conclusion

The TSPM is a socio-political derivate under the special Communist environment. It is neither a church, nor a governmental department, but just an agency used by the government to control Christianity and lead it to be eradicated ultimately. It has caused many controversies among Protestants, especially within the SDA Church. As time goes by, this kind of danger becomes less pronounced, and churches tend to actively participate in the TSPM's affairs, which will weaken the identity of the SDA Church and its connection with the worldwide organization. This is the new crisis we need to be aware of. The SDA Church as a whole should form a unified understanding of this. In China, due to the instability and uncertainty of the religious policy, it is better for the SDA Church to deal with the church-state issue in the middle way, in order for the better survival in case of trouble.

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