

# History of the “Three-Self” Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and Its Impact on Christian Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

In order to carry out effective church ministry in Shanghai, one must comprehend the context of Shanghai; its natural and social environment; its personality and lifestyle, family life, local religions, language, customs, culture. Especially it is important to understand the “Three-Self” Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in Shanghai and how it operates in the rest of China. Although many people are not aware of this uniquely Chinese Christian organization, a clear understanding of its governance and its relations to church organization is crucial for effective church ministry. The aim of this paper is to provide an outline of the history of TSPM and how it has affected and continues to affect religious organizations in China, include the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Keywords: Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), cultural context, context, church organizations

## Induction

In order to carry out effective church ministry in Shanghai, one must comprehend the context of Shanghai; its natural and social environment; its personality and lifestyle, family life, local religions, language, customs, culture. Especially it is important to understand the “Three-Self” Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in Shanghai and how it operates in the rest of China. Although many people are not aware of this special Christian organization, its governing is crucial for church ministry. Thus, the aim of this tutorial paper is to provide a clear description of the history and political and cultural context of the TSPM and its influence on Christian organizations in China.

## “Three-Self” Patriotic Movement

The term “Three-Self” originated with John Nevius, an American missionary to China and Korea in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He proposed a strategy of self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating local churches in China and Korea<sup>1</sup>. The strategy was used in Korea successfully and made church growth explosively. However, in China, the strategy was used by the CPC as a tool to rid the church of “imperialism influence.”

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<sup>1</sup> Zhongguoji 1993, 166

The People's Republic of China was established on October 1, 1949 by the Communist Party of China, led by Mao Zedong. Under Communist ideology religion is discouraged and it is a challenge for Chinese Christians and a struggle for them to survive in this kind of situation. In the early 1950s, after discussing with the highest government officials and getting permission, a Christian named Wu Yaozhong, a former secretary of Young Men's Christian Association, with some other Christian leaders who were sympathetic to the new Communist regime initiated the TSPM. The "Three-Self" is a characteristically Chinese way of abbreviating "self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation," which respectively reject foreign church leadership, financing and missionaries, while "Patriotic" indicates loyalty to the newly-established People's Republic of China.

In order to provide a clearer picture about the TSPM, more details about its founder, Wu Yaozhong, and how the movement begun in the early 1950s are as follows. Wu was born in Guangzhou and converted to Christianity in his youth. In 1918, he was baptized and became a member of a Congregational church.

Later, he worked for Young Men's Christian Association, taking charge of its schools and then went to the United States to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City for his master's degree in philosophy. As time passed by, Wu became a proponent of the social gospel and emphasized the ethical teachings of Jesus, and wanted to use Christian ethics as a remedy to solve the social problems in China. He devoted himself unreservedly into political and social movements, and had been a Young Men's Christian Association secretary, author, and editor of a Christian magazine *Tian Feng-Heavenly Wind*<sup>2</sup>.

In March 21, 1948, before the Communist's revolution, he wrote the famous article *The Tragic Time for Christianity*. In this article, he announced that "Chinese Christianity has become the tools of imperialism for culture invasion," it belonged to the "people's opium"<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, some articles, sympathetic to the Communist appeared in Wu's Christian magazine *Tian Feng*.

Due to these reasons, after the establishment of The People's Republic of China, Wu and four other Christian leaders attended the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference which was organized by the CPC and its members from various non-Communist political parties, mass organizations, and public personages from all walks of life to take part in the discussion and management of state affairs<sup>4</sup>.

After that, Wu and other Christian leaders consulted at least three times with Premier Zhou Enlai about Christianity's future in Communist China<sup>5</sup>. Finally, in response to a request made from the CPC leaders,

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<sup>2</sup> Zuiyi 2010

<sup>3</sup> Geduan 2009

<sup>4</sup> Geduan 2009

<sup>5</sup> Geduan 2009

he published the “Christian Manifesto” that became a mark to launch the TSPM<sup>6</sup>. Of course, Wu was a dominant figure in the movement until the “Cultural Revolution” of 1966 to 1976.

The movement began formally in 1950 and allowed the government to administer organized Christianity. In order to “purge imperialism”<sup>7</sup>, each denomination had to cut off religious and economic links with foreign missionary organizations. Just at this period the Korean War (1950-1953) broke out, and the U.S. government announced a freeze of all Chinese assets in the United States. In response, the Chinese government also did the same<sup>8</sup>.

Due to the embargo of these two governments, some Chinese Christian organizations that had been dependent on assistance offered by American missions were stranded in difficult financial situations. Meanwhile, the church pastors were incited to accuse European and American imperialism in the church. As a result, with the political and economic pressure, various Christian organizations and groups made independent plans and quickly enforced the principle of “Three-Self.”

Eventually, every Protestant denomination had to become a member of the TSPM first, and then was allowed to carry out their church activity. In 1954, Christian leaders held a meeting in Beijing and formally established the TSPM Committee of the Protestant Churches of China. From then on, all Christian sects in China completely cut off links with foreign missions, and this was the commencement of independent development and patriotism<sup>9</sup>.

Due to the Communist’s radicalism and few believers in church, all Protestant denominations were united in 1958 under one church named “United Worship” by the TSPM<sup>10</sup>. Since the TSPM is not a denomination itself, distinctions of denominations do not exist within the organization. From 1966 to 1976 during the “Cultural Revolution,” public religious activities were strictly prohibited in China, even the TSPM. Believers who disobeyed were arrested, imprisoned and tortured for their faith, while Bibles and other religious writings were destroyed, and churches as well as homes were looted. Wu was then put to silence<sup>11</sup>.

In 1979, Wu died in Beijing and the government officially restored the TSPM Committee after 13 years of non-existence. One year later the Chinese Christian Council (CCC) was formally established in order to help the churches to do their ministry. The leader was bishop Ding Guangxun.

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<sup>6</sup> Zhongguoji 1993, 5-19

<sup>7</sup> Wu 2010, 263

<sup>8</sup> Zhongguoji 1993, 32-33

<sup>9</sup> Zhongguoji 1993, 43-48

<sup>10</sup> Wuyao 2009

<sup>11</sup> Zuiyi 2010

The TSPM and the CCC are formed as the “Lianghui” (meaning two organizations). They have different functions. The TSPM manages the political affairs, and the CCC is an ecclesial organization which serves as the national organization for church ministries, offering its services to the churches in performance of their ministry. In order to work smoothly, the popular trend is “two organizations, one team.” They form the only state-sanctioned (registered) Protestant church in mainland China and are named the “Three Self” Church<sup>12</sup>.

In regards to the government’s “United Worship” policy, there is no Protestant denomination in China. This policy began in 1958. Combined worship takes place in this form. The believers from different denominational backgrounds have service and worship together in one church within convenient commuting distance and (offered) commonly supported facilities. Through this way, the believers formed new congregations. Although the new congregation still kept some traditions such as the different forms of baptism, rituals, and so forth, it gave up denominational titles and structures, and do not emphasize denominational church order or doctrine, and it never discriminated, nor did churches attack each other<sup>13</sup>.

The “United Worship” policy has been applied very successfully; many young generations do not know the denominational concept, therefore, the leaders of the TSPM always claim that the Chinese Christian churches have entered the post-denominational era<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, three denominations still exist in China but they are not easy to amalgamate. They are the SDA Church, the Church Assembly Hall, and the True Jesus Church. They are allowed to keep limited independence in the “Three-Self” Church system. It means they have freedom to preach their denomination’s doctrine to a certain extent. In contrast, they are prohibited to establish their own theological seminary and press. What is more, in some areas these organizations cannot put up their denominational sign or title on the church building.

Due to this situation, the government’s policy is “uphold united worship; advocate mutual respect in matters of faith and worship, seeking common ground while shelving differences”<sup>15</sup>. However, besides the three denominations mentioned above, some other denominations began revivals in some areas and denominational sense is becoming stronger<sup>16</sup>.

After 30 years of development, the TSPM/CCC has become a mature organizations. Generally, according to the different Chinese district level, the TSPM/CCC also is divided into different levels (state, province, and city or county) and under the supervision of the corresponding government religion or the Communist United Front department.

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<sup>12</sup> Zhongguoji 1993, 91

<sup>13</sup> Huifu 2004

<sup>14</sup> Runzhongguo 2010

<sup>15</sup> Jianci 2011

<sup>16</sup> Runzhongguo 2010

Each level has a committee which consists of several members (president, vice president, secretary and vice secretary) to manage the daily affairs<sup>17</sup>. Regular meetings are held to discuss internal matters, such as human resource, finance, church programs, and work plan; of course, government officials attend to express their requirements.

The state level is the highest Christian organization in China, and the province levels are secondary. Neither of them are in charge of local churches and they just handle the big issues of the church<sup>18</sup>, such as entertaining foreigners, visiting other countries, publishing books, setting up theological seminaries and disseminating political policies. The church income depends on the regular offering from church members which pays salaries to church workers and covers other expenses.

Most churches do not have to report or submit offerings to the government. Occasionally the local churches donate to poor or disaster areas. In addition, the local churches have limited rights, such as without consent from government officials, elders and pastors cannot be ordained, preachers cannot be invited from other provinces and allowed to go to other regions for preaching or training<sup>19</sup>.

The pastors working on different levels are organized to participate in all kinds of political activities, pursue further studies, go on study tours, and assist in anniversary and festival celebrations<sup>20</sup>. These activities indeed help the church workers to extend their horizons. Leaders in different level of positions eventually become members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference at different levels.

During the last two decades, in order to reduce the emphasis of "Justification by faith alone," an alternative theological movement construction was proposed. The main purpose was to divert the central message from salvation in Jesus only to focus on the love of God. Thus, it was understood that if people are kind, they will go to heaven. This philosophy was not well accepted. It led to many pastors in the "Three-Self" Church just pretending to agree. Leaders of the TSPM/CCC continued to insist on this "new theology" construction<sup>21</sup>.

## The House Church

In the early 1950s, some Chinese Christians disagreed on the registration policy requiring churches to become part of the TSPM. They considered the TSPM as a political instrument which interfered with the church's internal affairs by atheistic government officials. In addition, they worried that the TSPM "reflects the Communist government's attempt to keep Christianity out of key segments of its society, to

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<sup>17</sup> Lianghui 2011

<sup>18</sup> Xiehui 2008

<sup>19</sup> *Shanghaiang* 2006, 17

<sup>20</sup> *Shanghaizhong* 2001, 473

<sup>21</sup> Shengxue 2008

reduce the Gospel to a set of moral rules that serve its social objectives, and to remain in control of what is after all a “Patriotic Movement”<sup>22</sup> .

They realized that the communist control over the Christian church was detrimental to the spirituality and health of the church; thus, they would rather hold worship services at homes. Those groups outside of the TSPM were called House Church or Underground Church because they were not officially registered organizations and were outside of government restrictions.

They were not allowed to independently own property and hence, they often met in secret private houses. Their members and leaders also were frequently harassed by local government officials. Commonly, some of them were imprisoned and brainwashed through labor camps<sup>23</sup>. This situation parallels the early church under pagan Roman’s persecution. During the “Cultural Revolution” of 1966 to 1976 all Christian worship and activities were forced to meet underground, even the official churches were closed, and the house church movement was solidified as an ongoing phenomenon. Toward the end of the 1970s, under the Reform and Opening Policy, both the “Three Self” Church and House Church revived and began to grow rapidly.

Even 50 years have passed and the political environment has changed, the historical gulf between the “Three-Self” Church and the House Church still exists and keeps them distant. The senior members of the House Church vividly remember the time in the past when the “Three-Self” Church served as the Communist government’s informant and helped it persecute the House Church.

“Three-Self” Church and the House Churches have different perspectives on theology, church structure, pastoral care, spirituality, and society influence. As a result, the younger generation are puzzled about which form of church worship is better suited for church growth.

## Summary

After the Peoples Republic of China was established on October 1, 1949, the TSPM appeared. Each Christian church had to cut off religious and economic links with foreign missionary organizations because it was believed that they were instruments of imperialism for cultural invasion. As they encountered these challenge, some churches chose to become members of the “Three-Self” Church, and some rejected and became house churches. Both of these groups were persecuted during the “Culture Revolution” (1966-1976), but have developed rapidly since the commencement and reform policy of Den Xiaoping, the Chinese leader after 1976. Currently, the “Three-Self” Church and the House Church still exist in Shanghai and unfold their respective advantages and disadvantages about theology, structure, pastoral, spiritual, and society influence.

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<sup>22</sup> Three-self Church 2011

<sup>23</sup> Dixia 2011

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