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Bypassing the Party-State? The Implications of Urban Protestant Growth in China

Protestantism attracts social disaffectedees. Increasing visibility creates new tensions. Societal renewal prioritised over political activism.

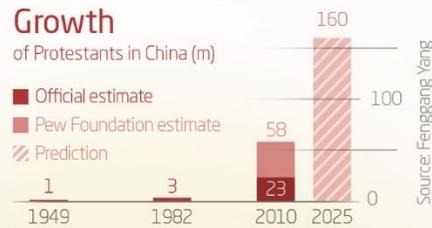
By Phil Entwistle, MERICS Visiting Academic Fellow

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- **Protestantism has grown rapidly in China over the past 30 years.** There are now an estimated 50 million or more believers. The centre of gravity of Chinese Protestantism has shifted from rural to urban areas, and from the relatively uneducated to the highly educated.
- **The perception of a moral crisis in Chinese society is a key push factor** leading urbanites to search for alternative sources of meaning, morality, comfort and community beyond those offered by mainstream society or the party-state.
- **Protestants have become increasingly visible in Chinese society.** The perception of believers as kind and honest has served to reduce the suspicion other Chinese feel towards Protestantism, which was once seen as an alien religion.
- **There is a risk that these improved perceptions will be undermined by Protestant insularity,** with believers expending all their social energy within their own communities to the detriment of engagement with wider society. Protestants' conservatism on issues of sexuality also risks alienating them from young urbanites who might otherwise be attracted to Christianity.
- **Protestants do not generally want to see sudden political change in China.** Amongst some believers, particularly amongst the small number of prominent Protestant activist lawyers and intellectuals, there is the desire for greater democracy and political reform. However, a higher priority is to see the spiritual renewal of Chinese society from the bottom up, through the spread of the Christian gospel.
- **Urban Protestants generally take a low profile politically.** Whilst they continue to spread the message of Christianity in a low-key manner, churches rarely mobilise for collective action against the party-state.
- **The popularity of Protestantism in urban China reflects the pluralisation and individualisation of Chinese society.** Whether this will result in a new era of civic engagement or social atomisation depends upon the extent to which Protestants are willing to engage with wider society. It also depends on whether the party-state antagonises the Protestant community via political repression, or attempts to reduce tensions, allowing believers to make more active contributions to societal renewal.

Urban Protestants in China

Social and political implications
of a rapidly growing group



1. Isolation, opposition or engagement: the possible roles of Protestantism¹

A leading pro-democracy activist declares on social media, 'Today, I decide to follow Jesus.'²

A young mother lies beaten to death in a McDonalds restaurant after refusing to divulge her phone number to alleged members of a quasi-Christian sect who were trying to recruit her.³

Inspired by the Bible and their own experience of homelessness, a Beijing couple set up a school to educate and care for street children.⁴

These are just a few recent examples of prominent news stories involving China's urban Protestant Christians. They raise the question of what wider implications the growth of Protestantism will have for Chinese society and politics.

Will the churches serve to unite social groups in political opposition? Or will they form tight, radical groups strongly at odds with both a socially liberal urban society and a politically illiberal party-state? Will Protestantism provide a sanctuary for those wishing to cultivate their own spirituality whilst avoiding all political and social engagement? Alternatively, will adherents form a constituency that supports the party-state and its agenda through, for example, their provision of social welfare?

Protestantism has grown rapidly in China since the late 1970s. The best estimates indicate that around 4% of China's population is now Protestant - meaning there are over 50 million individual believers.⁵ According to some scholars, by 2030 China could overtake the United States as the country with the world's largest Christian population, with over 200 million predicted adherents.⁶

Whilst the focus of this Monitor is Protestantism, it should be noted that China also has about 9 million Catholics.⁷ Catholicism enjoys a longer history in China, and has also experienced a revival in recent decades, albeit a more modest one. China's Catholics face a distinct set of issues in terms of their relationship with the party-state, most notably that of Sino-Vatican relations.

China's Protestant revival began in rural areas. However, in more recent years the faith has attracted increasing numbers of converts in cities, and amongst those with higher levels of education - particularly women.⁸ Whilst a minority of China's urban Protestants have grown up in Christian homes, the majority are adult converts.

2. From Confusion to Conversion to Community

2.1 Social dissatisfaction provides fertile ground for Protestant growth

Protestant growth has been fostered by a widespread sense of moral crisis in Chinese society. High profile cases of official corruption and decadence, the growth of inequality, and stories of individual citizens cheating or neglecting each other have led to a great deal of introspection and debate among China's citizens, intellectuals and policy-makers.⁹

At that time I had just split up with my boyfriend [who had been secretly seeing another woman]. My worldview really collapsed. I thought, 'How could the world be so different from what I thought?'

IT engineer, 29 years old, female, Protestant, Shenzhen

Some individuals suffer jarring first-hand experiences of a moral disconnect between the values they had been taught as children and the reality of society. Others feel a more general sense of disillusionment or discomfort with the social environment, perhaps compounded by the personal pressures of urban life: finding work, saving to buy a flat, or searching for a marriage partner.¹⁰

As Chinese society has become pluralised and individualised, there are increasing numbers of options available for those searching for alternative sources of meaning and community beyond those offered by mainstream society or the party-state. Some find answers in Chinese philosophy, political activism, or self-help books.¹¹

However, a number of factors draw people to Protestantism in particular. Some converts are attracted by the way in which Christian acquaintances demonstrate moral behaviour that is different from that of their peers.¹² Others find communities of mutual trust and support in Protestant churches. Still others discover answers in Christian teachings on God, sin and forgiveness. Some are drawn by allegedly supernatural experiences, such as miraculous healings or answers to prayer.

At middle school, life had been simple. There were a lot of opinions that I hadn't had the time to understand. But after I arrived at university, it was like all of sudden there was no big homework stress, so questions sprang up that I had previously suppressed, such as, 'What is the significance of life?', this kind of thing.

Recruitment advisor, 25 years old, female, Protestant, Beijing

For many urban Protestants, studying at university is a key moment in their journey to faith. Attending university involves a move away from home and parental influence. University students have growing cognitive capacity combined with more access to information. The latter includes more contact with foreigners and new ideas, and more free time to use social media. University is therefore often the first chance that young Chinese have to come into contact with Christianity.

2.2 Differences between registered and unregistered churches have narrowed

In China the biggest problem is that people don't trust each other, right? There is a sense of guardedness. But when I was in church I discovered that I could let down my guard, because they were extremely happy to help me.

Entrepreneur, 30 years old, male, Protestant, Shenzhen

Protestant faith facilitates the development of a variety of forms of social connection between believers, ranging from informal social networks, to small Bible study groups, to urban churches of several thousand members.

Chinese churches can generally be categorised as either registered or unregistered (see Figure 1).

Unregistered churches operate in a legal grey area;¹³ although such gatherings are technically illegal, the authorities often turn a blind eye. Registered churches belong to the Three Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council, the party-state's official Protestant organisations, and they enjoy a degree of legal protection from the state. In urban centres these churches often have large, purpose-built buildings, and congregations of several thousand, for whom the church must run several services each Sunday in order to accommodate.

The division of Chinese Protestantism into registered and unregistered churches has historically been a source of tension.¹⁴ However, in more recent years the differences between these churches have diminished, certainly at the level of individual grassroots believers. Despite a few remaining areas of mutual suspicion, believers who attend registered and unregistered churches differ little in terms of theology. The decision to attend an unregistered or registered church is often more a matter of practicality or personal taste.

Figure 1: **Key differences between Registered and Unregistered Churches**

	Registered urban churches	Unregistered urban churches
Also known as	Three Self churches (三自教会); Official churches	House churches (家庭教会); Underground churches
Number of adherents in China*	Est. 23 million	Est. 35-60 million
Average congregation size	Large to very large (Several hundred to several thousand)	Small to large (Several tens to several hundred)
Positive perceptions (from other believers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly visible Protect Christianity in the public space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committed and devout
Negative perceptions (from other believers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to political control and interference by party-state Theologically liberal Too large and impersonal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Danger of developing heresies and cults Less accountable

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*This estimate covers rural *and* urban areas, no breakdown available. ¹⁵

3. The increasing visibility of Protestant Christianity is reducing old suspicions and creating new tensions

Protestantism was once seen as an alien religion in China. However, as the faith has grown, increasing numbers of Chinese have come into contact with believers, serving to lower their suspicions about Christianity. Indeed, amongst some non-believers, Protestantism has a positive image, largely due to the perception that believers are kind or honest.

Aside from practising their faith in their individual behaviour, Protestants also engage in collective charitable activities. Reflecting attitudes in wider Chinese society, Protestants remain wary of involvement with state-run charities, generally preferring to participate in charitable activities through their church or organisations established by Christians. Such activities include visiting orphanages, donating money, and volunteering in earthquake-stricken regions of China.

Despite these positive developments, Protestant growth also brings with it the possibility of new tensions.

Firstly, Protestant insularity risks undermining the increased goodwill that non-believers feel towards believers. Urban Protestant communities are characterised by high levels of trust and sociability. However, this trust and sociability is largely confined to fellow Protestants, which restricts the extent to which it is able to benefit wider society. Similarly, urban congregations tend to be demographically homogeneous, which limits middle-class believers' ability to reach out to those of other social strata, such as migrant workers.¹⁶

When I was young, I felt that Christianity was pretty good. There were lots of people around me who, when their family was not harmonious, would maybe choose to go and believe in Jesus. There were some people who changed a lot.

Engineer, 26 years old, male, no religion, Shenzhen

Another source of potential friction lies in some Protestants' social conservatism on a small number of issues. A case in point is their opposition to same-sex relationships, one of the few areas in which Chinese Protestants' attitudes are consistently less liberal than those of non-Protestants. In urban areas, Protestantism generally attracts those aspiring to a more liberal, cosmopolitan outlook.¹⁷ Among this demographic in particular, previously

conservative opinions towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues are liberalising. If China's Protestants do not reconsider their attitudes, they therefore risk alienating the very constituency of young urbanites who would otherwise be most drawn to Christianity.¹⁸

Despite these potential sources of tension, however, Protestantism continues to be attractive to urban Chinese. Many believers actively share their faith, mostly on a private basis amongst friends and family. Some engage in more organised, open forms of proselytising, such as Christmas shows or leafleting in parks, which can create tension with party-state actors.

A lot of what [Protestants] say is extremely good. So on the question of whether I believe God exists or not, I'd like to challenge my previous beliefs, and I really want to listen to [some] preaching. But I don't know afterwards whether or not I will change my current atheist situation. I just want to have a try.

Auditor, 26 years old, female, no religion, Beijing

4. Protestants want societal renewal, not political transformation

Urban Protestants tend to be more sceptical than non-Protestants of the party-state and its agenda.¹⁹ However, this does not mean that the majority of believers desire radical political change, or that they are politically active. Amongst some Protestants there is the desire for democratising reforms. However, a higher priority for them is to see the spiritual renewal of Chinese society from the bottom up, through the spread of the Christian gospel.

As such, urban Protestants generally take a low profile politically. Whilst they continue to spread the message of Christianity in a low-key manner, churches rarely mobilise for collective action against the party-state. Relationships between even the unregistered churches and local governments are usually harmonious; only when such meetings get too large, too public, or involve foreigners or cross-regional mobilisation do the authorities intervene.

There are exceptions, however. In 2014 the provincial government of Zhejiang province began a campaign of church demolition and cross removal, ostensibly in the name of enforcing planning regulations. The campaign has antagonised believers,

provoking angry confrontations between local congregations and the police, and strongly worded letters of protest from both official Protestant and Catholic organisations.²⁰ The party-state, through its actions, can therefore serve to negatively influence Protestants' opinions of itself far beyond the congregations directly affected.²¹

I think that there are many aspects of [China's] politics that need to be improved. But I certainly can't suddenly bring about a big revolution to turn everything upside down; I think this is an impossible and unrealistic method. I hope that we will be able to move gradually towards greater democracy and freedom.

Accountant, 24 years old, female, Protestant, Shenzhen

Another incident, the case of Shouwang Church (守望教会), has prompted a debate amongst Protestants as to how politically active they should be, and whether churches should be the vehicle for such political activism. Shouwang Church is a Beijing-based unregistered congregation that attempted to buy its own property in which to worship. When the authorities blocked the sale, members

protested, beginning in April 2011, by holding a series of open-air worship services, with the result that many were arrested. Some Protestants praised Shouwang's members as brave but others argued that their actions were needlessly provocative and have served only to increase the party-state's suspicions of Protestantism.

I hope that more people will be able to believe in God, and we can then address social contradictions really well, via the instruction of the Bible. If they have no active faith as a basis, I will really worry about China's future.

TV editor, 25 years old, male,
Protestant, Beijing

Another form of Protestant political activism is through Christian lawyers and public intellectuals, such as Gao Zhisheng and Wang Yi, who have challenged party-state policies not only with regard to freedom of worship, but also on wider issues such as property evictions and rule of law.²² However, these figures are the exception to the norm. Most Protestants keep their distance from politics, preferring to effect gradual change by influencing those around them. Protestantism gives these believers a sense that change is possible, beginning with their own life but then, through their prayers and actions, for wider Chinese society. Part of this

involves embracing kindness, hard work, honesty, and rejecting corruption and money worship - behaviour that Xi Jinping himself has condemned. In this regard, Protestants' desire to demonstrate good citizenship is in line with the party-state's agenda.

5. Protestantism has become a Chinese religion

The party-state is concerned by the fact that Protestants draw their moral compass from a transnationalised source outside of its control. Prominent Christian involvement in Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement, just across the border from the mainland, serves to exacerbate this sense of nervousness;²³ so does the presence of foreign missionaries, whom the party suspects are driven by political, and not merely religious agendas.²⁴

It is these concerns that perhaps lie behind what is commonly perceived to be the party state's attempt to counteract the influence of Christianity by promoting Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism.²⁵ They also explain the party-state's repeated initiatives aimed at sinicising Christianity, or indigenising it into Chinese society. Some urban Protestants view indigenisation as a positive thing. Indeed, Chinese believers have long been developing their own theologies, structures and songs largely independently of party-state involvement. However, within the unregistered churches in particular there

is a sense of scepticism towards official sinicisation initiatives, viewing them as top-down attempts to subsume the church within the state agenda.²⁶

Why is indigenisation increasingly successful? It's because becoming a Christian and forgetting your country isn't in line with the spirit of the Bible. I think the Bible says that you should impact your society, influence the people around you, and enable them to also come to believe in the Lord. But it doesn't say that you should make them change their nationality.

Administrator, 24 years old, female,
Protestant, Beijing

The irony is that it has often been the most indigenised forms of Christianity - those that have had the least contact with foreign Protestant teaching - that have most endangered social and political stability. From the Taiping Rebellion in the 19th century to the Church of Almighty God (全能神教会), allegedly responsible for murdering a woman in a McDonalds restaurant in Shandong province in 2014, various groups have mixed quasi-Christian teachings with traditional Chinese millenarianism²⁷ sometimes with violent results.

Such groups have been labelled as 'evil cults' (邪教) by both mainstream Chinese Protestants and the party-state.²⁸ However, whilst the party-state sees such groups as evidence that religion must be tightly controlled, supporters of the unregistered churches argue that it is political repression that provides fertile conditions for them to emerge.

6. Confrontation, Co-existence or Co-operation? The Future of Protestantism in China

The popularity of Protestantism in urban China reflects the pluralisation and individualisation of society, as individuals experiment with different identities, beliefs, and forms of community.²⁹ The question is whether the outcome of these trends will be a new era of civic engagement, as urban Chinese learn to develop mutual trust and co-operate for the collective good, or atomisation, as society fragments into a mosaic of mutually suspicious individuals and groups.³⁰

To a certain extent, this depends on how the Protestant communities choose to act. Will believers decide to withdraw from wider society, condemning it as deviant and associating only with other believers? Or will they decide to engage with it via evangelism, charitable work, and friendships

with non-believers? And will theological and ecclesiological issues be resolved through civil debate or acrimonious factionalism?³¹

It also strongly depends on how the party-state chooses to deal with the Protestant communities. On the one hand, it could continue to antagonise and alienate China's Protestants via continued church demolitions, cross removals, and crack-downs on freedom of worship. If so, we might expect to see an increasing polarisation between church and party-state, as the Protestant community becomes yet more suspicious of the authorities and yet more willing to embark upon confrontational actions. Such an atmosphere could feed the further growth of radical millenarian groups such as the Church of Almighty God.³²

On the other hand, the Chinese authorities could take steps to reduce tensions between Protestants and the party-state and allow the former to make more open, constructive contributions to society. Such moves could include reducing restrictions on worship, permitting Protestants to join the Communist Party,³³ and making it easier for them to participate in charitable activities - either as individuals or as churches. This approach could build political goodwill amongst Protestants without making them feel like they were being coercively co-opted.

However, such a stance may also lead to the development of a stronger, more confident civil society. Perhaps the Communist Party's biggest fear is not that the churches will confront it directly, but that in embarking upon their own project of social renewal, China's Protestants will simply bypass it altogether.

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¹ Unless otherwise stated, the analysis contained in this Monitor is predominantly based on primary data from the author's own fieldwork - 100 interviews with Protestants and non-Protestants in Beijing and Shenzhen in 2011 and 2012 - as well as subsequent analysis of online materials.

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