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The Way in Developing the "Selfhood" of Chinese Church

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In China, all religions, except Daoism which was established by Laozi, a Chinese citizen, were imported. However, among them, only Catholicism and Protestantism are regarded as foreign religions by the Chinese people. Even though the foreign missions made great efforts to develop them, the result was small. Taking Protestantism for instance, the membership had reached only 700,000 by 1949.

Reasons for the above mentioned situation are various when analysed from the point of view of the Chinese Church:

1. The objectives of the Western Missions in the 19th century were closely interrelated with western colonialist expansion. The methodology which the Western Missions employed was in contradiction with the truth of the Gospel. Under the invasion and oppression of Western powers, Chinese people were living an extremely miserable life. Some of the Western missionaries, however, believed that it was God's will to open the door of China by war.
2. The churches set up in China by foreign missions became the territory of western churches. Following the Western model, the churches in China were divided into different denominations, and foreign missionaries controlled them separately. Western missions provided the financial resources of the churches. The necessary result of that was to disengage the Christian Church in China, keeping it away from the Chinese people and making it "a country within a country".
3. Some Western missionaries, intentionally or not, indoctrinated the Western notion that "Christendom prevails" in their evangelism. Their attitude was that the poverty in China was a result of the people refusing Christianity, and by deprecating the eminent Chinese culture of a thousand years they caused a strong antipathy among the Chinese people.
4. What influenced the distressed Chinese people at that time was the emphasis in the gospel brought from the West that believers would gain special advantage, including both material benefit for this life and the gift of the kingdom of heaven for the next life. This kind of interpretation of faith is utilitarian and individualistically oriented, and it is very easy to cause reversion and division from non-believers.

With the progress of the struggle against the powerful countries, the people with insight in church circles in China started a movement for the independence of the church in China in the early 20s of last century. In 1906, Rev. Yu Guozhen from a Presbyterian church in Shanghai established an Independent Church of the Church of Jesus. He called upon the churches in China not to rely on personnel or materials provided by the foreign missions, but to run their own churches. In the 20s of the 20th century, some Chinese intellectuals who were also church leaders put their emphasis on the indigenisation of the church, and advocated the integration of Christian doctrine with traditional Chinese culture. It shows that Chinese Christians started rather early to make the Christian Church in China really Chinese and to find its own

way to express its "selfhood", even if these efforts did not remove the foreign image of the Chinese Church completely.

Since the founding of the New China, encouraged by the declaration "Chinese people now have stood up", Chinese Christians started the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in 1950. That is a process of running our Church by ourselves independently. In the more than 50 years since then, (although churches ceased their activities in the devastating period of "the Cultural Revolution") the Chinese Church has made great progress in the process of developing its "selfhood". The details are as follows:

1. The Chinese Church has removed its foreign image and become one of the religions for the Chinese people. With the implementation of the policy on religious freedom, public opinion is in favour of Christianity, and Christians enjoy equal social rights with other people.
2. The confidence and sense of responsibility of Chinese Christians in our churches have been growing tremendously. In the past 20 years, new church buildings have been constructed all over China. Among these, most are financed either by church members' individual contributions or by contributions from urban churches to rural churches.
3. Being no longer controlled by Western Missions, the Chinese Church initiated the practice of "united worship" in the 50s, and entered into the "Era of Post-denomination". Many new church members now have no notion of "denominations".

The reason for this progress is that the "Three-Self" movement increased our self-consciousness. The "Three-Self Principle" predicates that we must own the sovereignty of our Chinese Church from the aspects of structure, finance, and guidance. Chinese Christians are trying to run our Church well. The way to run our church well is by the decision of Chinese Christians under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. No one else should make any effort to interfere.

With the open policy of China in the recent 20 years, the economical, political and cultural influence of the West has been increasing, and, therefore, the Chinese Church is facing new challenges. Some churches or church organisations outside China do not respect the sovereignty of the Chinese Church, and attempt to restore denominations or to conduct their own church activities in China. By doing so, their purpose is to control the Chinese Church, and to do what the missions did in 19th century driven by the old missiology.

In adhering to our selfhood and running our Church well, we realised clearly that the Chinese Church must have its own theological understanding, and adjust the theological concepts that are not adaptable to the development of history. Bishop K.H. Ting has done a great deal of work in this field. In 1989, the TSPM and the CCC passed the resolution on "Strengthening the Construction of Theological Thinking". In recent years, our colleagues from all over China are discussing various theological issues. The following issues are related to the selfhood of the Chinese Church:

1. The relationship between the localisation and the catholicity of the church

We believe in "the Holy Catholic Church". The catholicity of the church derives from the fundamental belief that "the church is the body of Christ". "One Lord, one faith, and one baptism" is the common belief shared by all the churches that carry on the mission of witnessing to the resurrected Lord. Since the apostles' time, however, churches situated at different regions (as "the church in Ephesus", and "the church in Corinth") carry different characteristics and different missions. That is the placement from God. For Chinese Christians, Christianity was introduced from the West, and historically it was closely related with Western culture. To some extent, the missionary movement in the past mingled Western politics and social concepts with Christian doctrines, and demanded that Chinese Christians receive Western culture and Western value concepts while receiving Christianity. For a long time, the Christian Church in China did not have a theological "Selfhood". When the American fundamentalists launched a fanatical attack against Darwin, the tales that "snakes will dwell in Darwin's grave for his advocating the theory of evolution" also went around in churches in China. When Marxism in the West was regarded as the foe of Christianity, Chinese Christians, who never had any contact with Marxism, took the proposition of "being at odd with atheists" for granted. As Y.T. Wu, one of the initiators of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, once pointed out sharply, Chinese Christians "must excavate the treasure of the Gospel of Jesus on their own, and break away the fetter of western theology".

The Three-Self principle stands for self-independence. That is to develop the "true self" of the Chinese Church on the basis of the catholicity of the Church. That is to say that a church must be contextualised. Does this have any suspicion of "nationalism"? Is it against the stream of "globalisation" that is on the tide recently? We believe that as long as the boundaries of nations and countries are permitted by God, God's mercy must be incarnated in the equality of nations. The appropriate rights of different countries must be protected. Economic globalisation cannot become the means through which the interest of weak nations is deprived by powerful ones. Cultural pluralisation should not become the way to devastate the fine tradition of individual nations. No matter where a church is, it must be independent, self-determined and equal to others. The CCC has joined the WCC, and it endorses the principle of the WCC as it is the fellowship of churches. The Chinese Church puts all of its efforts into its self construction; therefore, it will never do harm to any church in any other country. This stand has nothing to do with narrow "nationalism". Localisation and catholicity are not opposite to each other, and they are not exclusive from each other either. A local church should not exclude itself from the church universal. Our Chinese Church needs to develop its own theological thinking, and establish its own model of management. We need to share and communicate with other churches on an equal basis as well. We shall share constructive experiences and not simply take over. We can share non-conditioned resources without losing our sovereignty. We believe that the catholicity of the church will be fully manifested, and the richness of Christ be truly revealed when churches in different countries develop their own theologies and church models according to their own context, and mutual respect, sharing, and cooperation are practiced.

2. The relationship between diversity and unity in a church

The Chinese Church has entered into its post-denominational stage, and no denominational structure exists any more. That fact, however, does not necessarily

mean that we are completely "united" or that "the Chinese Christian Church" has taken its full formation. Various churches still have differences in characteristics of faith, liturgies, and so on. With the opening of China, some denominations outside of China have been trying to instigate those Chinese Christians who have denominational backgrounds to restore denominations and create obstacles on our path toward unity.

We have gained experiences from the past. We believe that "unity" is what Jesus prayed for his apostles, and it is the goal for which a church should strive. Since Chinese Christians participated in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and practiced "united worship", we have made some progress on our path to unity. The catechism for common use, the Chinese Christian Church Order, and the New Hymnals with songs from different backgrounds are concrete examples of the achievement of our unity. In the process of this unifying work, we have tried our best to assimilate all that is meritorious from different denominational backgrounds and traditions, and have reached a common understanding. The great majority of our churches now are keeping up with our common understanding and share our experience in church life.

Unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. Church life is meant to be diverse. Before reaching complete unity, some influence and practice from the denominational background will exist. Our policy is to "respect each other". In the churches in China, church members can choose freely either sprinkling baptism or that of immersion, and liturgical Eucharist or bread breaking. We understand that over-emphasis on diversity may enlarge division. For that reason, "to remain the heart of unity" must be stressed on the basis of a mutual respect. We shall not pick on each other's differences, but advocate co-operating with each other, and avoid conflict caused by diversification. Heresies that obviously contradict the whole teaching of the Bible, the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, and jeopardise people's lives and health, and social security, will not be tolerated even for the reason of diversity.

The construction of theological thinking and the development of an ecclesiology that is adaptable to our Chinese context is the necessary path through which unity will make substantial progress. We shall summarise the experience that we have gained from walking on the 'Three-Self' path through theological research and sharing, have it rooted among Chinese Christians, make it predominant in theological thinking, and have it become the guidance for our church construction. If we can be squarely rooted in an appropriate theological thinking and lead our Christians, those exclusive, fanatical and extreme theological tendencies that may jeopardise the physical and spiritual health of Christians will be gradually seen through and rejected by a great majority of Christians. Thus, our Church will be able to develop in a right direction.

3. The relationship between a church and its constituency

The concepts of ghost and devil are very popular among Chinese people even though the majority of people do not have a concrete confession of faith. Christians are a minority among our people in that Christians compose only little more than one per cent.

In the past, being severely influenced by conservative theological thinking, Chinese Christians seemed to have only one thing to do with non-Christians - that is to convert

them and to have their souls saved. Presently some overseas Christian organisations keep the same mentality, and organise people to spread this "gospel" in China. They disregard the religious policy and related statutes of China, ignore our social order, disrespect the sovereignty of the Chinese Church, and carry on various unlawful activities. What they try to establish in China is "a Chinese Church" without its selfhood.

Through the construction of theological thinking, we realised that the human beings that God created are spiritual and integral. We should meet the spiritual need of people and also the need for a healthy life from every aspect. Jesus Christ is fully divine and also fully human. He was tempted when he had physical needs such as starving for food. The difference is that he did not sin. When Jesus was alive, he healed many sick people, and fed five thousand people. All this he did because of his love and compassion toward the people that God created, even though not all the people he helped followed him.

We realised also that all human beings are created in the image of God, and, therefore, all of them have the image of God. According to that fact, we must respect all human beings. We shall spread the Gospel and bring the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven to people, but not to impose anything on people. To learn to respect people and love people will help us to open up ourselves to others, wipe out our antagonistic attitude toward those who have different faith, and with whom we are willing to coexist peacefully and treat mutually. We will also be able to understand, hold dialogue and cooperate with, and be friendly towards, each other. We believe that this kind of attitude will make the Gospel easier to spread.

4. The relationship of the Church with society and country

A church is an organisation composed of God's people. At the same time, a church also exists in a certain society and country. Its destiny is closely related with the people in its surrounding area. Chinese Christians fully understand that. Faced with wars or events like "the Cultural Revolution" in the past, the churches in China could hardly survive. In the recent 20 years, China has been undergoing a reform and opening. The social situation has been stable and, therefore, our churches have been growing. The number of Christians now, over 15 million, is at least 20 times as many as it was in 1949. Because of the stability of people's lives, and the consistent increase of income, the ability of the Chinese Church to be self-supporting is also increasing. Taking Shanghai for instance, there are 161 churches and meeting points altogether in Shanghai in 2002. Among them, about 70 are newly built in the past 20 years. It would be impossible to achieve this without a sound economic base.

We Chinese Christians love our country and our socialist social system. "To be a good Christian and to be a good citizen" is a very popular watchword among our Christians. We are often questioned by people from abroad as to how we play our prophetic role in China. This question implies that, in order to play our prophetic role in China, we must necessarily have to criticise and even antagonise our society and our government for no reason.

Being influenced by conservative theological thinking, Chinese churches used to be rather keen on "not to care about the world, but to concentrate on self purification". Now we have realised that that kind of attitude would cause damage to our churches.

As the spokesman of God, a prophet must manifest God's righteousness, as Amos advocated that we should love what is good and hate that which is evil. The government and the church belong to different spheres, but both are under God's domination. Because of human weakness, no human system is perfect. A church shall support the government that punishes the evil and encourages the good, and support the social activities that meet the proper needs of society. A church shall also participate in constructive activities. The current session of the TSPM and of the CCC of the Chinese Church established a social service department. The primary goal of this department is to mobilise Christians to care about society and to help the marginalised groups, rather than only to focus on individual spiritual formation.

We certainly criticise social crimes. Leaders of the Chinese Church attend NPPCC meetings from national level down to district level to exercise our political responsibilities, to criticise greed, fraud, and all amoral behaviour in the society. That is the way that we play our prophetic role in China. The point is that we shall not negate the decent efforts in a society and see the society as a demon simply because of indecent elements in it. Our effort is to encourage Christians to carry forward our Christian ethics, and to bear witness in the field of social morality, professional morality and family morality. In that way, we will be able to influence people around us and create genuine social accord with all people together.

The Chinese Church is in an ever-changing historical process. In the primary stage of socialism in our country, we will keep seeking for our selfhood by carrying on our Three-Self principle and continuing the construction of theological thinking. It is our hope that our effort may make a contribution to the church universal.