

China Church & World Mission in the Past, Present and Future

A. China Church and her Mission in the past

Historians on China Church History used to say that the Westerner missionaries “knocked” at the door of China Church (I used “China Church” to distinguish between the “Overseas Chinese Church” outside of China) in the past for four times: the Nestorians (AD 635, and Nestorians were expelled in AD879), the Catholic monks (mainly Franciscans, c. AD1289, and expelled in AD1370), the Jesuits monks (especially Matteo Ricci, AD1583-1610, and expelled in AD1724), and finally the Protestant missionaries (such as Robert Morrison, AD 1807, and James Hudson Taylor, AD 1854; by this time both Catholic and Protestant missionaries’ works were able to continue until today).

We also have the records of local inter-Church cooperation in Church expansion and mission works: the first National Mission Conference by Church and Missionaries organizations (AD1877, all the 142 participants were westerners) aimed to join forces in mission works, and the second National Mission Conference (AD1890, among the delegates, 443 were westerners missionaries and 2 were local Chinese pastors) aimed to join forces in mission works not only in the coaster regions but to the remote provinces and more cooperation in education, medical, literature, and Bible translation. In the year AD1877, we have the record of 900 westerner missionaries, and only 4 Chinese pastors in China Church, while in AD1890 we have 1657 local Chinese pastors and 1296 westerner missionaries in China Church. By this time, the local has outnumbered the foreigner missionaries.

We saw the first Indigenous Presbyterian Chinese Church formed in AD1862. After this more local Chinese Church groups “de-attached” from the western mission agencies and formed more and more independent and indigenous China Churches. I would say these indigenous China Churches were very mission oriented just as their predecessors.

Later we saw the local Chinese Church Evangelism Conference (AD1918) where the delegates formed the first local Chinese Church Evangelistic Band which aimed to send missionaries to the west and remote provinces. The Five Years Evangelistic Movement (AD1929-1934) which aimed to double the Christian population and the Three Years Revival Movement (AD1946-1949) aimed to evangelize the whole nation.

We have the first local record of sending 20 missionaries “overseas” from China to Hong Kong and Macao in AD 1840 where they ripe about 100 converts after 4 months (not to say that the westerner mission agencies did not send missionaries to the different tribal people groups for mission works in China).

After this, we have more records on sending out Chinese pastors and missionaries overseas, especially to the Malacca Strait countries such as Malaya and Indonesia.

Between AD1860-1874, after the signing the Peking Treaty, more missionaries from the west entered China. Even though during this period of time government officer setup many restrictions and even persecutions to the Christian Church, but we observed revival in China Church. Mission organizations increased from 20 to 41, while missionaries increased from 200 to 1300, and Christians increased from 2000 to 37,000. Over this period of time, many evangelistic works in the coaster region and mission works to the inner provinces.

By the year 1910, China Church has grown fast. Missionaries from the west counted more than 5000, and local Chinese pastors has increased to more than 7000. Just after the Democratic China Government established in AD1910, more and more Chinese missionaries were sent out overseas.

In the early 20th century, we saw many Chinese Churches were established in Philippine, Malaya (and Singapore), Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam etc. Afterward, due to more mission works to the overseas Chinese migrants and workers, then we saw the period of overseas Chinese Church established all over the world.

B. The Present China Church

a. The present China Church structure

After the modernization policy launched since 1978, Churches in China grew rapidly, especially House Church in the villages. Not to say that Church never grew before 1978, but rather they spread “underground” after 1950 when the communist took over China. There was a survey figure in 1949 that there were 834,909 Christians in China. But after more than 30 years of persecution and restriction, we returned to find that there were more than 30 millions Christians in China; a growth rate of 30 times within 30 years.

I would say the works of Holy Spirit among China Church occurred more frequent in the 1980s and the early 1990s, especially in the central provinces like Henan, Anhui, and Shandong. We also heard about the revival in Helonjiang in 1986-89, and the rapid grow of Churches in Wenzhou as early as 1980. By this period of time, not only the House Church grew rapidly, but even the “Government approved” Three Self Church was packed with thousands of worshippers on Sunday. With this development pace, by 1990s, the structure of China Church was obvious: Three Self Church and House Church.

Recently, some articles published discussing on the China Church in 2008. The Three Self Church has 37,500 Churches (where each congregation ranged between 200 - 3000) and 75,000 meeting centers (where each congregation ranged between 50 – 200 people); while the House Church has about 800,000 to 1 million Churches or meeting places (each congregation ranged between 30 – 200 people). We may estimate presently there are about 70 to 80 millions of Christians in China.

| Three Self Church | House Church |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 37,500 + 75,000 Churches | 0.8 – 1 millions Churches |
| 15.75 millions Christians | 54 millions Christians |

We believe that with this established structure and the large number of Christians, this will likely laid a good foundation for future development, especially in world mission.

b. The mission strengths: financial, resources, missionary

The booming economic in recent years in China is significant and even surprised the western worlds. Its national reserve has outnumbered all the countries in the world, and even now the top three banks in the world are in China. Even though the economic tsunami hit most of the countries in 2008, but China still maintains growth in GDP. Nevertheless, due to the huge population , the GNP per annum (2008 is US\$4500, expecting US\$6000 by 2010) is still far as compare to the developed countries (GNP of USA per annum may reach US\$45,000). I would say most of the Christians in China are belonged to the lower classes in the society. Until now, we do not observe good tithing in China Church, with only some exceptions in the cities. Nevertheless, we can foresee a good future in financial contributions among Christians, by then we can encourage more mission and sending works.

Concerning mission resources, I would say we are still very “primitive”, and everything has to build from scraps. For example, a missionary sent from the coaster region to Tibet, and even after three years he was unable to store resources such as gospel tracts, Bibles, follow-up kits, hymn books, discipleship training tools in Tibetan language.

Presently there are less than 100 missionaries sent out from China, but more than 200 are having their internship in western part of China preparing to be sent out from the countries. From the experience of one sending organization, the main problems where China missionaries encounter are their capability, training, and financial support (I will illustrate this later). Most of these missionaries are young, with lower education, less professional, language inability, without full training in theology and mission, lack of field support, and finally less financial support due to their poor sending Churches. Many of these missionaries face depression or even casualty in the mission field. However, this is a painful process which China missionaries are facing now a day, and we hope they will learn well and prepare for the future.

C. The Present Mission Works in China Church

a. Mission training in China

Only with the help of foreign mission agencies, presently there are 3 or 4 proper Mission Schools established in China which accommodate less than 70 students. Apart from these fulltime mission schools, there are some Mission Classes, only in regular basis, designed for pastors to create awareness in mission.

For example, the Chengdu Mission School (Sept. 2006 – Mar. 2008, then stopped operation due to lack of qualified students) recruited 21 students into an 18 months in-house training and another 15 months field-work program. Finally, in June 2009, only 5 students were graduated with Diploma in Mission. Presently, these 5 graduates are sent to different regions (2 in Inner Mongolia, 1 in Northern Xinjiang, 2 in Kuwait).

For next example, the Great Commission Mission School (in Beijing) launched a full time program (Sept. 2008 – June 2009) with 12 students, finally sent out 5 to western China. Expecting out of these 8 graduates, 4 will send outside China in the future.

There are some “half brown mission schools” in China. For example, one in Lanzhou, with 20 students, where the curriculum mixed up biblical and mission subjects. There is one in Xian, one in Huhershou, one in east Beijing, one in Qindao, and one in Kunming. Probably we have to wait for some more years before we can see China Church sending out properly trained missionaries.

Outside of China, there is one mission school in Penang, Malaysia, and another one in Manila, Philippine, both of these schools recruit only students from China. Even though, these 2 schools designed only short term training.

I believe, in the near future, there will be more and more proper Mission Schools established in China. But no matter how strong is the strength of China Church, at least within the next two decades, these mission schools still need foreign experts or trainers to come in to help in order to run the whole program effectively.

b. The Awareness of Back to Jerusalem Movement in China

The vision or movement of Back to Jerusalem appeared since 1942, consecutively in Henan and in Shandong province. Later, more than 100 missionaries moved to northwest China and tried to go out China through the Silk Roads with very poor facilities and supports. Almost all of these missionaries “martyred” after 1950 when the communist took over China and closed the border to the west.

The Back to Jerusalem Movement (BJM) rekindled among House Church in 1990s. The movement quickly spread to many foreign countries by some pastors from China. Supportive, opposing, observing views appeared upon this movement by Churches in China and overseas.

Until 2004, some prominent Church leaders in the West and East formed the Back to Jerusalem Movement International Organization and called the 1st (2004), the 2nd (2006), the 3rd (2008) and coming 4th (2010) BJM International Consultation (in Jerusalem) and written down statements and declarations about this Movement. In the BJM Declaration, it stated four actions clearly, namely, Mobilization & Recruitment, Pre-field Training, Cooperation in Sending, and Field Support. In the Declaration, it spelled out that the main target of BJM is the descendants of Isaac (Jews) and Ishmael (Muslims). The BJM International now has Headquarter office in Hong Kong and actively carrying out the actions laid down. Promoting, printing, helps to establish mission schools and mission classes, guide to set up sending agencies, coordinating China missionaries to targeted fields in Central Asia and Middle East, organizing of conferences etc. are some of the works carrying out recently.

I believe, with an official organization like BJM International, more mission activities or coordination works between China missionaries and the outside worlds would appear in the years ahead.

c. The formation of sending agencies in China

There are some Churches in China that sent missionaries out from China since 2000. Like the China Gospel Fellowship (in Henan), YinShang Church (in Anhui), the Wenzhou Gospel Group (in Wenzhou, Jehjiang), the City Revival Church (in Beijing), the Timothy Fellowship Church (in Wuhan), the Qorlet Church (in Xinjiang), the Xian Glory fellowship, the China Muslim Christian Fellowship, the North-West Church, the Xian City Church etc. But, there are many other Churches sent local missionaries from one province to another province, especially from eastern China to western China.

In recent years, with the helps of foreign mission agencies, some local mission agencies then appeared. For examples, just to name a few, the Beijing City Revival Church set up a Mission Sending Department and sent out missionaries not only to the western part of China, but to Middle East countries. The All Nations Church in Shanghai also forms a Mission sending branch and sent out missionaries to Iran and Kuwait. The YinShang Church also forms a Mission Sending Department and trained and sent out missionaries to South East Asia and Middle East countries.

I believe, with the helps of foreign mission experts, more mission sending agencies will rise up in China, and sooner when these local agencies gain more experience in mission sending, there will become more independent in their sending works.

d. Mission to the Muslims in China and other part of the world

Out of the 55 minority tribal peoples in China, 11 of them are identified themselves with Islamic faith, the Muslim population in China total to 31 millions. This is a big challenge to China Church when planning mission works to Muslims either in China or outside China.

Presently, there are some mission works among Muslims in China, for example, the Muslim Christian Fellowship of China (in Lanzhou, with more than 10 workers) has gone into Kazak and Dongxian tribes and built mission centers, ECC China (from Beijing, has sent more than 10 workers) into Kazak, Uygur, Hui and built mission centers, the YingShang Group has sent many workers into Kazak, Hui, Uygur and built meeting points among them. The indigenous Uygur and Kazak Churches themselves have their own workers as well. We know there are more mission works among the Muslims in China by foreign missionaries. I know Frontier Mission does send some missionaries to the China Church has sent out missionaries to Central Asia and Middle East countries, not in large scale, and by 2009 we can identify 4-5 to Kyrgyzstan, 2 to Kazakhstan, 2 to Kuwait, 2 to United Emirates of Arab, 1 to Uzbekistan, about 20 to Pakistan, 1 to Iran, 14 to Egypt, and may be few more in Arabic countries where we are unable to identify.

Until today, we hardly heard any mission works among Muslims from China Church to South East Asia. Unconfirmed news that there are some pastors from China presently received training in Indonesia and in Malaysia which aim to evangelize Muslims.

Conclusion: The Need of Partnership

No doubt, China Church is the rising mission force in world evangelism. In order for her to become a powerful and effective mission partner to many exiting mission forces like the Westerner's or the Korean's missionaries, she should be properly guided and partnered.

a. How to be a good mission partner with China Church mission sending agencies?

The mission capacity of China Church is like a growing baby at this juncture. She needs proper helps or good guides. On the other hand, China Church has her own history and cultural distinctiveness, and thus to be a partner to China missionaries, we should handle the relationship delicately.

From my experience, there are many strong and weak factors when making partner with China missionaries:

1. China missionaries take "relationship" strongly. We make friend first, then everything makes easy. If you are my grandfather or father, or my Church leader respected friend, then I will honor you as my respected person too.
2. China missionaries experienced many hardships and persecutions in their own country, and they might choose to go to some "dangerous" fields even though other missionaries think they are a "fool" to do so. They always prepare for martyrdom.
3. China missionaries go out sometimes with bare hand and limited supports. Sometimes they would not consider "standard" living, pocket money, children education, retirement saving, better accommodation etc. as compare to other missionaries from the West or East.
4. China missionaries go out with limited resources. Even after they make many conversions in the mission field, they might not have enough financial supports and resources like printing materials, training tools, Church building etc. to follow-up what they needs.
5. China missionaries are willing to be a servant of the Lord to the local people, but do not want to be overruled by other mission sending agencies, or controlled by other missionaries on the fields.
6. China missionaries might not train as much as other missionaries in theology and pastoral skills.
7. China missionaries usually handicapped with foreign languages. They might not have spoken English and even the language of the target people group they are serving, but willing to learn while on the mission field. This might take a period of time to master the language.

No matter what strong-nesses or weaknesses, China missionaries know the important of partnership in mission fields and willing to work with other missionaries from other part of the world. I deeply believe China Church will be a obvious force in world mission the coming future.

b. The rising force in World mission field.

There are many voices about the strength of China Church in mission. From the high view that she will send out a million missionary to the low view that she may need another 30 years before she can be a true mission partner in world mission field. I believe we can only take "a middle view" on this consensus. I believe China Church is eager to go for world mission, but might takes more time to prepare for herself. It might take some more years, may be 10 to 15 years in order we can see an obvious mission force actually appear.

Finally, I want to illustrate that there are few factors might contribute to this mission force:

1. The awareness of the House Church to mission: for many years China Church only concentrates in

home mission, and only by the end of 1990s that she aware of world mission, especially when the vision of Back to Jerusalem starting to spread among House Churches. There are many mission conventions but only appeared among pastors and Church leaders. Until recent years that then the House Church has more awareness about mission and sending works. I believe it will take some more years, may be another 10 to 20 years, in order for most of the China Church to have mission awareness.

2. The mission training: There are training ministries of what we called as “mission trainings” but actually these are not the proper one. There can only be considered as “half brown mission training”. Only with the help of foreign experts that we find two or three actual mission schools existed. Again, it will take some more years for the local Church groups to build their own mission schools.
3. The political situation in China: since 1978 China government launched its Modernization policy, but religious freedom is the last item to be developed, or even never allow to be developed. Anyway, the China Church is always clever enough to find “gaps” to develop these activities.
4. The economic growth in China and the financial strength of the China Church: this should be the most obvious development so far we can predict. More and more Churches are able to support their own missionaries in other countries.
5. The capability of mission sending agencies to manage the missionaries outside of China: it is always lack of experience and senior field missionaries to take care of new coming missionaries. Presently, we can see most of the missionaries sent out of China where their field supports are by foreign experienced missionaries.
6. The partnership between China missionaries and the other missionaries in world mission: this is a decisive factor for China Church to involve in World Mission.

My final word is, no matter how many or how strong China missionaries are, the future is how they work with each other in the mission fields in World Mission. I believe a Mission China will come soon.

¹ Good reference in China Church History, see Su Wen-Fung, China Church History, in Chinese (San Francisco: Hua Suen Pub., 2005), and Wen Mu, China Church History, in Chinese (Hong Kong: Global Chinese Bible Institute, 1999).

² By AD 1949, the China Church counted 834,909 Christians and 6500 churches. A special statistic as we see the work of God where after 30 years of persecution, we returned in 1980 and found 30 millions Christians in China Church.

³ Su Wen-Fung, op. cit. p. 35.

⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵ Only for your interest, by 2008, we have more than 13,000 Chinese Churches overseas. These oversea Chinese Churches are mission oriented as well.

⁶ Jonathan Chou, Modern China Church History 1949-1990 (Hong Kong, 1989), p. 32.

⁷ We see numerous huge House Church buildings appeared in Wenzhou area, and named this city as the “Jerusalem of China”. More than million of Christians appeared in Wenzhou, and in some districts the Christian population may consist more than 70%.

⁸ See Cheng, Christianity in China (Beijing, 2008), WenMu, An Analysis to China Church in Early 21st Century (Hong Kong, 2004).

⁹ If we make a rough estimation: Three Self Churches $37,500 \times 300 = 11,250,000$, $75000 \times 60 = 4,500,000$, and House Churches $900,000 \times 60 = 54,000,000$. Total up to 69,750,000 (almost 70 millions). Most of the organizations involved in China ministry usually estimated about 80 millions

Christians in China Church presently, exclusive the 6 – 8 millions Catholic in China. To note, official figure of Catholic Church has 4 millions members (Government approved Catholic Church), and 5 – 6 millions members (underground Catholic Church).

¹⁰ China Statistic Handbook 2008 gives the figure of population is 1.46 billions.

¹¹ Only from my knowledge: 20 to Pakistan, 21 to Cambodia, 4 to Laos, 5 to Indonesia, 4 to Myanmar, 5 to Northern Thailand, 3 to Vietnam, 1 to Uzbekistan, 14 to Egypt, 1 to Iran, 2 to Kazakhstan, 4 to Kyrgyzstan, 2 to UEA etc.

¹² The author is also the head of ECC China (Every Community for Christ, belonged to Oversea Missionary Society International) which manage more than 25 missionaries in western China, all of them have been trained in Mission Schools.

¹³ In Chengdu, Beijing, Wenzhou and Lanzhou. Also, Pastoral Mission Classes are established in Beijing, Lanzhou, and Xian.

¹⁴ The BJM vision co-existed in early 1940 in Henan and Shandong provinces in China. Details of this movement and its history, see WenMu, Back To Jerusalem Movement – Its past, present and future (Hong Kong, 2004).

¹⁵ There are Hui (9.8 million), Uygur (8.4 m), Kazak (12.5 m.), Dongxian (0.5 m), Kirgiz (160,000), Tajik (52,000), Uzbek (12,500), Salar (105,000), Tatar (5000), Bonan (16,500), Yugur (14,000), a total of 31,565,000.

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