

POLITICS OF FAITH: PATTERNS OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN MAOIST CHINA (1949-1976)

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Abstract: This article examines the role of Protestant Christianity in relation to the rise of the Maoist state. It focuses on the interactions between Christianity and state power, and the state's influence on the religious and political identities of Chinese Christians. In particular, it discusses how the state exploited Christianity to claim legitimacy and establish ideological control over the Christian population, and how ordinary Christians, in turn, drew on their religious resources to strengthen themselves in the competitive arena of politics.

Keywords: Chaozhou, Maoism, Little Flock, Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was a period of growth, suppression, and revival for the Protestant churches in China. Arising from the growing interest in the history of Chinese Christianity, this article presents two cases of church-state conflicts during the Maoist era (1949-1976). These cases are chosen to illustrate how ordinary Protestants responded to the political encounter between Maoism and Christianity, and what survival strategies they employed to protect themselves against the socialist regime. The first case concerns the Christian Assembly (*jidutu juhuichu*), known in the West as the Little Flock (*xiaoqun*), a fast-growing indigenous Protestant movement founded by Watchman Nee in the early twentieth-century. After 1949, the Christian Assembly transformed itself into a diffused network of religious groups for mutual support and expanded into many remote areas not yet reached by the missionaries. The second case concerns the Chaozhou-speaking Baptist and Presbyterian congregations in Guangdong

province along the South China coast (see "Map 1. Chaozhou").

Map 1. Chaozhou



While the urban church leaders succeeded in mediating conflicts with the local government, the rural congregations drew on longstanding kinship and lineage networks to create autonomous worshipping communities across the countryside. In both cases, the Protestant communities refused to be subjected to the control of the Maoist state. Neither did they subscribe to the anti-imperialist ideology of the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*sanzi aiguo yundong*): self-rule autonomous from foreign missionary and imperialist control, financial self-support without any foreign donations, and self-preaching independent of any missionary influences. As the overarching organization of the one-party state, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement sought to ensure that all Chinese Protestants would submit to the socialist order.

By rejecting the Maoist vision of church-state relations, these Protestants adhered to the belief in the autonomy of the church, proclaiming that each church should become an autonomous body, governing its affairs and remaining

independent from state control. However, the Communist state perceived ideological identification as synonymous with absolute loyalty to the new socialist nation. Therefore religious conversion was viewed as a challenge to the state. This pattern of Christian activism highlights the role of popular resistance against state-imposed modernity and throws light on the complexities of church-state relations in Maoist China.

1. MAOISM AND THE THREE-SELF PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT

What was Communist religious policy in the Maoist era? As with the imperial states of the past, the Communist state continuously pursued a “united front” policy of engaging China’s Protestant communities. The purpose was to sever their ties with foreign missionary enterprises, to place the diverse Protestant denominations under the control of a Leninist mass organization, and to purge reactionary forces and class enemies from the church. Underlying the Communist religious policy was the ideological conflict between state and religion. C. K. Yang argues that Maoist ideology was a non-theistic “faith” that manifested distinctly religious characteristics. Two aspirations of the Chinese nation express the essences of its idealistic nation: nationalism and materialistic progress. All reforms, revolutions, and radical movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to promote materialistic progress and establish a strong nation. The Maoist state made the same claim, but demanded from its people the unconditional subordination of all personal concerns. This appeal by the state was based on the premise that Maoist ideology offered the only guide to China’s ultimate destiny, the only means to national independence and modernization¹. Determined to emancipate the common people from religion and “superstition,” the Communist state propagated a secular, scientific, and rationalistic worldview. It denounced religion as “the opiate of the people” and an obstacle towards the socialist revolution². Its effort to control Catholics and Protestants led to a coercive assimilation of all Christian institutions into the Maoist state.

Against this backdrop, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement is to be discussed. The term “Three-Self” was originally coined by Rufus Anderson of the American Board of Commissioners for

Foreign Mission and Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society in the nineteenth century. “Three-Self” describes a mission policy that organized native Christians in Africa and Asia into self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating churches. After the Communist Revolution, the Chinese government replaced the “Three-Self” slogan with “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” in order to legitimize the state’s takeover of the Protestant church. Politically, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was a mass organization along the lines of the Communist Party’s united front policy. It was launched by the one-party state to politicize the religious sphere and control the Protestant communities. On June 28, 1949, Wu Yuzong, general secretary for Publications of the National Committee of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in China, acted as a middleman between the Communist Party and the National Christian Council. He urged church leaders to support the Communists. Many leaders of the YMCA and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) assisted Wu Yuzong in pursuing a pro-Communist agenda in the Protestant circle. The collaboration between the Communist Party, YMCA, and YWCA dates back to the revolutionary movement between the 1920s and 1940s, when the Communist Party had successfully co-opted some of the YMCA and YWCA leaders³.

In July 1950, Wu Yuzong led a delegation of nineteen Protestant church leaders to meet with Premier Zhou Enlai and draft a statement known as “The Christian Manifesto,” which expressed Chinese Christians’ loyalty to the Communist state. At that time, the Korean War broke out and anti-American sentiment ran high. The Manifesto called on Christians to fight imperialism, to make known the political stand of Christians in China, and to build a Church under the management of Chinese themselves. It marked the beginning of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. On the surface, the Movement called for the indigenization and ecclesiastical autonomy of Chinese churches. But its fundamental goal was to force the Chinese Christians to sever their institutional ties with foreign missionary enterprises in particular and foreigners in general.

Change in global politics affected Christians in China. After the outbreak of the Korean War, the government expelled all foreign Catholic and Protestant missionaries. The expulsion was

a nationalistic act and symbolized the end of foreign imperialism in modern China⁴. In the midst of the Korean War, the “Preparatory Committee of the Oppose American and Aid Korea Three-Self Reform Movement of the Christian Church” was founded to denounce Western missionaries. After a series of denunciation campaigns, the Preparatory Committee sponsored the first National Christian Conference, held in the summer of 1954, in which Wu Yuzong was elected Chairman and was assigned to organize the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The officials of the Bureau of Religious Affairs served as “advisors” to the Movement. According to Beatrice Leung, the Bureau of Religious Affairs was initially established to handle religious affairs under the Bureau of National Minorities, and in 1951 it was transferred to the Educational and Cultural Section of the Home Affairs Department. In addition, the United Front Department of the Communist Party’s Central Committee set up a Religious Section to implement Communist religious policy. The majority of religious cadres were Communist Party members, who kept an eye on religious activities⁵. Within less than a decade, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement ended the missionary era in China and marked the beginning of the Communist takeover of churches⁶. Clearly, the leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement had served as mere agents of the state to reshape Christian churches according to the Communist Party’s designs. Under tremendous pressure for absolute loyalty to the Maoist state, political neutrality was not an option and the churches could only exist in limited scope.

2. WATCHMAN NEE AND THE LITTLE FLOCK MOVEMENT

The Christian Assembly originated from the teaching and ministry of Watchman Nee (1903–1972), who was probably the most influential Chinese Protestant preacher in the early twentieth century⁷. Born in 1903, Watchman Nee grew up in a third-generation Anglican family. While studying at an Anglican mission school in 1920, Nee underwent an emotional conversion experience and decided to become a full-time evangelist. Under the influence of Brethren ideas, Watchman Nee rejected the hierarchy that he saw in the Catholic Church and most of the Protestant denominations in China. He urged Chinese Christians to develop strong laity and to break away from their dependence

on Western missionary enterprises for doctrinal instruction and administrative support. He saw a church or an assembly as “a spiritual body” composed of a group of Christians who were called out of this world - a concept derived from his interpretation of the Book of Acts in the New Testament. Strongly in favor of autonomous and independent churches, he maintained that there should be “one church in one locality”⁸. He emphasized the necessity to maintain independent local churches because on a doctrinal level, a local church could serve as a guardian of Christian teaching. He saw no religious and practical reason for a group of Christians to divide themselves into different denominations. What he sought to promote was a locally autonomous and nondenominational church independent of any external control. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, Watchman Nee encouraged Christians to break away from the well-established denominational churches to join the Little Flock Movement. It is estimated that by 1949 the Little Flock had as many as seventy thousand followers⁹.

In the post-1949 era, their reluctance to affiliate with the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement raised the problem of political identification with the Maoist state. In affirming their Christian identity, the Little Flock Christians found themselves divided between preaching the divine or affirming the Maoist ideology, and opting for political stability by submitting to the state or resisting the state in endless political campaigns. Some Little Flock members chose to collaborate with the state, whereas other members refused to do so, but either way, they were embroiled in politics. The degree of tension and conflict with the state made them an easy target of attack throughout the Maoist era.

In the midst of the Korean War, Watchman Nee was determined to strengthen and expand the Little Flock activities. In January 1951, he launched the “Ecumenical Campaign” (*jiaohui heyi*) to integrate other Protestant communities into the Little Flock. He supported those churches facing financial difficulties due to the expulsion of their missionaries and employed their ministers and evangelists. This decision was well received by some foreign missionary enterprises. Prior to their expulsion, a number of the China Inland Mission (CIM) and American Presbyterian missionaries handed over their church properties to the Little Flock because

Watchman Nee had decided to continue his evangelistic work in China. As a result, the Little Flock expanded into Yunnan province in western China, and absorbed into its hierarchy as many as ten CIM congregations and their ministers in Zhejiang province in central China¹⁰. In order to accommodate these Christian communities, Nee allowed them to maintain their different forms of church management and worship¹¹.

In structure, the Little Flock's "Ecumenical Campaign" bore resemblance to the Communist Party's bottom-up policy of coalition building, which was to ally with groups and individuals sharing similar interests in the revolutionary movement and to integrate them into the Party. By appropriating this Communist guerrilla tactic for evangelistic purposes, Watchman Nee was determined to build an alliance among other Christians and churches¹². Because of financial constraints and political isolation, many mission churches and local denominations did not have the ability to maintain their institutions, but forming a coalition with the Little Flock would enable them to survive in the post-1949 era. They created these alliances for the purpose of survival, and the goal was to save these local churches from being taken over by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. When these churches realized that foreign missionaries would never be permitted to return to China, they had to affiliate with the Little Flock permanently. The early years of the People's Republic presented a golden opportunity for the Little Flock to remap the landscape of Protestant Christianity across the country.

The Communist state viewed the rapid development of the Little Flock with suspicion and resentment, and plotted against Watchman Nee. In September 1951, four Little Flock members in the Nanjing Assembly denounced Watchman Nee as a reactionary. In response, Nee launched a counter-denunciation campaign and disciplined those pro-government Little Flock members¹³. But one year later, he was arrested. In 1956, he was accused as a counter-revolutionary and charged with a series of crimes against the state. He was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and died in a labor camp in 1972¹⁴. The Little Flock political denunciation in 1951 was clearly an effort to get rid of Watchman Nee's influence from within, but once made, the Communist state exploited it to undermine his credibility and to take control of the Little Flock congregations.

Following the arrest of Watchman Nee in 1952, the Little Flock leaders adopted several strategies to respond to the state persecution and to rebuild the Christian Assembly. The first strategy was to consolidate the internal unity of the Little Flock congregations by expelling the pro-government members. In 1953, the leaders of the Fuzhou Assembly expelled three members who had been involved in a local political campaign against Watchman Nee, and in 1955, the leaders of the Nanjing Assembly denounced the four members who had staged the mass campaign against Watchman Nee in 1951. The second strategy was to challenge the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. In July 1953, Yan Jiale and Fang Aiguang, leaders of the Beijing Assembly, publicly condemned the Three-Self Patriotic Movement as an instrument of the Communist state to take over the church, and therefore withdrew from the Three-Self on the basis of religious conscience. Yan also urged the Little Flock congregations in the northwestern provinces of Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi to denounce the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Fang visited the assemblies in Wuhan, Changsha, Guangzhou, Jinan, and Qingdao and explained to them the reasons for the Beijing Assembly's decision¹⁵. By 1954, over thirty assemblies across China, including all the eleven assemblies in Fujian province, withdrew from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. They all refused to attend religious services and political meetings held by the Three-Self Patriotic leaders¹⁶. This anti-Three-Self campaign undermined the legitimacy of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and threatened the Communist government's united front policy. The third strategy was to recruit members from all social sectors across the country. Because many Little Flock members graduated from Christian high schools and universities, they occupied important medical, educational, industrial, business, and government positions in the pre-1949 years. According to their professional skills, the Communist state classified them into three segments of the urban population: intellectuals and technicians, bureaucrats and urban administrators left over from the Nationalist regime, and the national bourgeoisie (i.e. privately owned industrialists, shopkeepers, and handicraftsmen). They were largely untouched by the Communist state in the early years and were encouraged to offer their services for the new political order. For example, in Shanxi province, forty-three teachers at universities, high schools, and

elementary schools were affiliated with the Little Flock. In Fujian province, many Little Flock physicians and nurses continued to work at state hospitals. The Little Flock leaders called on these urban professionals to evangelize among their friends and colleagues¹⁷.

In addition, the Little Flock evangelized among victims of Mao's land reform and mass campaigns, mainly the gentry, landlords, capitalists, and officials of the Nationalist regime, because the Little Flock members could easily appeal to them with a promise of salvation and an explanation for their suffering. As a result of this recruitment policy, large numbers of the former Nationalist Party members and government officials, capitalists, and landlords joined the Little Flock Movement. From 1954 to 1955, the members of the Anyang Assembly in Hunan province increased by more than half from 1563 to 2467. In 1954, all the eleven assemblies in Fujian province saw a triple increase of their church membership¹⁸. As far as these new converts were concerned, their religious conversion coincided with their desires for emotional support in the midst of political and social upheavals. In the short term, this phenomenon of mass conversion was solidifying an ideological resistance to the state.

Equally important was the strategy to educate the younger Little Flock members and to organize them into youth groups in support of each other. Because the government monopolized the educational institutions and constantly propagated its Communist ideas, the Little Flock leaders sought to counter the state's education of youth. Besides Bible study sessions, Sunday schools, and youth meetings for teenagers, they mobilized younger church members to create Christian fellowships in universities and schools and to evangelize among non-Christian students. The Little Flock members were found to be studying at twenty-three universities, twenty-six medical colleges, and many vocational schools. In July 1954, when the Shanghai Assembly organized a summer camp for university and high school students, as many as one thousand students from Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan, and Zhejiang province attended the event¹⁹. This evangelistic strategy was very effective in recruiting more young people into the Little Flock Movement in the early 1950s. The final strategy was to establish new strongholds in areas with relatively weak Communist control. Some Little Flock assemblies took advantage of Chairman

Mao's land reform and collectivization campaign for evangelistic purposes. In January 1954, Ye Meiliang of the Xiamen Assembly organized twenty-eight Christian families into a rural production unit in the Eighth District of Lungxi District, the purpose of which was to create a Christian village in the mountainous region. A similar example can be found in Jiangsu province where the Wujiang Assembly successfully established a Christian stronghold in the interior. Eighteen of the twenty-two households in Heshan Village Production Unit in Laichang district joined the Wujiang Assembly, and all the production supervisors and accountants were Little Flock members. These two Little Flock outposts were deeply rooted in the longstanding village networks in southeastern China. The Urumqi Assembly in Muslim-dominated Xinjiang province recruited evangelists from eastern China and helped them to obtain the government's permission to migrate and settle there. The Little Flock members in Gansu province followed the seasonal merchant networks migrating to Tibet²⁰. By 1955, the Little Flock had developed into a nationwide movement expanding into many remote areas and frontier provinces not yet reached by Christianity.

However, these initial successes were short lived. The Communist state launched an aggressive nationwide campaign against the Little Flock during the late-1950s. In January 1956, Watchman Nee was accused of espionage, licentiousness, and stealing of church funds²¹. Meanwhile, extra effort was made to purge the Little Flock members from educational institutions, industrial enterprises, and government departments. Most of the Little Flock leaders across the country were arrested and charged with crimes against the state²². The campaign against the Little Flock was steeped in political discourse and revealed the increasing politicization of Chinese society. By the Great Leap Forward in 1958, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement had successfully taken over the Little Flock institutions and integrated them into its hierarchy. Most of the Little Flock members appeared to distance themselves from Watchman Nee's teaching, but they carried on their activities. In 1958, reports of their activities came in from Inner Mongolia and Yunnan provinces, where the Little Flock established cell groups outside the Three-Self Patriotic churches²³. Ironically, during the turbulent period of the Cultural Revolution (1967–76), all the bureaus of public security and religious

affairs ceased to function, which in turn opened some space for the Little Flock and other Protestant groups to operate at the grassroots level. It was not until the opening of China to the outside world in 1978 that the Little Flock had begun to resume their activities in public. Unlike the Little Flock characterized by the intensity of church-state conflicts, the next case study shows that there was much room for mediation between the Protestant communities in Chaozhou and the Maoist state.

3. THE BAPTIST AND PRESBYTERIAN DENOMINATIONS IN CHAOZHOU, SOUTH CHINA

Located on the South China coast, Chaozhou was far away from the central and provincial governments. The Chaozhou dialect was the dominant language in the coastal areas, whereas the Hakka dialect was widely spoken in the interior. Since the American Baptist and English Presbyterian missions established outposts in Chaozhou in the 1860s, Protestant Christianity had grown as a grassroots movement. With more baptisms in the interior than on the coast, conversion was predominantly a rural phenomenon. It was the countryside, not urban areas that became the center of Christian movement. These converts came from diverse social backgrounds: they were farmers, artisans, merchants, medical practitioners, beggars and widows. They were deeply integrated into the political, social, economic and cultural spheres of the local society.

Equally important was an overlap of Chinese kinship and Christian identities. Where the churches were erected outside the walled villages and surrounded by Christian households, they were often misunderstood as independent Christian settlements. In fact, these Christian households constituted an essential part of the local community, as they identified themselves with a particular denomination and with their villages. This remarkable overlap of religious, kinship and territorial identities characterizes most Baptist and Presbyterian congregations in Chaozhou, and has a far-reaching impact on the church-state relations in the Maoist era²⁴.

The Communist state's intervention into church affairs led to the takeover of church properties in Chaozhou. In early 1950, the local authorities required all foreign missions and Chinese churches to register their properties with the

authorities. This policy identified the locations and values of all foreign mission and Chinese church properties. In the Korean War, the local government confiscated all the American Baptist and English Presbyterian mission properties. These properties were registered in the 1930s under the name of the foreign missionary enterprises. The government claimed to transfer the foreign missions' properties to the Chinese churches in order to gather support among local Christians against their missionary patrons. This tactics of divide and rule aimed at creating internal conflicts within the Baptist and Presbyterian institutions. It sought to weaken the Christian communities by cutting the economic and cultural ties with the West. This would eventually allow the government to put all denominational churches into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, thereby making it easier to control and manipulate the Protestants. In Chaozhou as in other parts of China, the foreign missionary enterprises owned most church properties and supported many schools, hospitals, and clinics. The local Christians only owned the market and village churches and few city churches. When the state monopolized the educational and medical institutions in the 1950s, it deprived the church of an important source of income. Without financial support from the West, it was extremely difficult for the local church leaders to operate efficiently and to maintain their social and cultural prestige. In 1957, most local churches appealed to the local municipal government to return foreign mission and Chinese church properties occupied by the state. But the municipal authorities ignored their requests²⁵.

After seizing the properties, the state created the Local Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement to integrate all the local congregations into the state mechanism of religious control. In the Korean War, the local Bureau of Religious Affairs mobilized the Christians to support the nationwide Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Ironically, the Local Committee of the Movement revealed the strong Baptist and Presbyterian presence. Of all the thirty-seven Three-Self committee members, there were eight Baptists, sixteen Presbyterians, one Seventh-Day Adventist, four Little Flock members, two leaders of the New Chinese Christian Church, one representative of the True Jesus Church, one representative of the Chinese True Jesus Church, and four representatives with unclear denominational affiliations. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement proclaimed to

indigenize the leadership structure of Chinese churches by involving native church leaders, but this was only a tactic to gather support for the socialist state²⁶. These church leaders collaborated with the state provided that there was freedom of worship among the urban congregations. Keeping a low profile and avoiding confrontation with the state appeared to be the most sensible survival strategy. They believed that the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was more about expressing their loyalty to the Communist state than building a church run by and for the local Christians.

These local Three-Self Patriotic church leaders were not mere agents of the state to control the local Christians. They played a dual role in church and state interactions: an implementer of the Communist Party's designs as well as a moderator against some anti-religious policies. Politically they mediated between the Christian communities and Communist officials. They constantly appealed to the Shantou municipal government for the return of church properties. They subscribed to the Communist rhetoric of anti-imperialism and stressed that the Christians in Chaozhou were patriotic; therefore, they should be given financial assistance by the state in times of difficulty. During the land reform, they complained about the harsh anti-Christian policies in the countryside, and urged the municipal, district and village authorities to reopen the market and village churches for worship. They had effectively used the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee in Shantou as an institutional umbrella to support evangelistic activities throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

Furthermore, the state forced all church leaders to demonize the foreign missionaries whom they had known for many decades. This was a regular procedure throughout China. Those church leaders who refused to do so had to attend many political study sessions. While the state appeared to have co-opted the urban church leaders in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the socialist transformation of rural China threatened the Christian movement in the countryside. In 1950, the central government in Beijing had introduced the Agrarian Reform Law, which confiscated landowners' holdings for redistribution among landless peasants. Almost all the Christian villages in China failed to protect their landed properties during the land reform. In Chaozhou, all the rural congregations ceased to function after the land reform. By the

mid-1950s, 121 of the 123 Baptist congregations no longer existed institutionally. The church buildings were converted into state schools, warehouses, village factories and government offices²⁷. The land reform designed to break landlords' dominance had the added impact of undermining the socio-economic basis of Christian villages.

After the land reform, the government followed up with a campaign of agricultural collectivization in 1953. It wanted to stop the reemergence of rich peasants, to achieve agricultural specialization, and to increase production. This campaign reorganized village communities into mutual aid teams where peasants worked as a collective unit. The redrawing of the village boundaries merged the Christian communities with their non-Christian neighbors. This reduced the influence of the rural churches in local politics and replaced the existing Christian power structure with a socialist one.

Despite the state's attempt to subdue the churches, there were many factors affecting the power relations between Christians and Communist officials. One major factor had to do with the personality and administrative style of the officials. If the outside officials were hostile towards the Christians, there would be strong resistance from the latter. Instead many officials tended to avoid any conflict with the Christians. Moreover, the Christians often changed the officials' attitudes towards Christianity. In rural areas characterized by complex webs of social relationships, the Christians used the practice of gift exchange to win the officials to their side. As a result, the officials turned a blind eye to any religious activities as long as the Christians met the grain production quota. There were many reports of large-scale Christmas celebrations in Catholic and Protestant villages across Guangdong province in 1958 and 1959. Clearly the Christians and Communist officials were very pragmatic in dealing with each other. There was much room for church-state mediation at the grassroots level²⁸.

The most serious challenge facing the Christians was the continuous organization of mass campaigns by the government. The campaigns against "reactionaries" and "class enemies" purged church leaders with foreign connections. In particular, there was the Three-Anti campaign in 1951 to combat corruption, waste, and bureaucratism. In 1952, there was also the Five-

Anti campaign against bribery, tax evasion, fraud, theft of government property, and leakage of state economic secrets; this campaign led to a nationwide attack against the churches. In these campaigns, the state labeled the church leaders as political and social outcasts. This labeling affected how the church leaders and their family members were treated by the local work units. If the church leaders belonged to landholding and merchant families, they were labeled as landlords and capitalists, resulting in an uncertain future for them and their children²⁹. This explains why many young Christians escaped to Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s.

Throughout the Maoist era, the local Protestants employed a wide range of survival tactics to respond to the politicization of Chinese society. One strategy was to create a diffused network of support. Because Christianity was an integral part of the kinship and lineage structures, many Catholics and Protestants relied on the longstanding social networks to maintain internal unity among their church members and to pursue religious activities. Another strategy was to shift the center of religious operation from urban to rural areas in order to avoid confrontation with the state. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the center of Christianity was the countryside. The success story of rural church implantation inspired the church leaders to return to their roots in the 1950s. What concerned the state most were the acts of Christian resistance against the officials. Huang Zhongren, a Baptist, pretended to uphold the thought of Chairman Mao in the political study sessions, but he often presented himself as the spokesperson of the local Protestants when dealing with the officials³⁰.

But the most unique strategy was to rely on the overseas Chinese Christian networks for support. Remittances sent by churches in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia proved beneficial to Christians in Chaozhou throughout the Maoist era. For example, the Baptists in Chaozhou received support from Lu Mingcai, known as Lui Ming Choi in Cantonese, a very successful Chaozhou merchant who had founded many Baptist elementary and secondary schools in Hong Kong³¹. This South China Sea maritime network was a key to understanding the dynamics of the Christian movements in the post-1949 era because it created an invisible maritime highway that channeled resources from

Overseas Chinese Christians into their Chaozhou homelands.

CONCLUSION

The various patterns of church and state interactions in Maoist China are insightful at both factual and conceptual levels. Shortly after the Communist Revolution, the Maoist state launched the Three-Self Patriotic Movement to integrate the Christian communities into the socialist order. But when the state co-opted these communities, it did not see the need for cooperation with the church. The church, unwillingly, found itself in opposition to the state. Rather than maintaining a policy of accommodation, the state deliberately acted against the church in order to control the religious sphere. Therefore, the art of managing tensions between religion and politics was an integral part of the state-building process. But the anti-Christian propaganda and policies failed to mould the Christians into rational, atheistic, and Communist people during Mao's reign. Both the Little Flock Christians and the Baptists and Presbyterians in Chaozhou refused to accept the subservient role that the state had assigned them. They used their limited resources to organize religious activities in a socialist state. They followed a pattern of religious activism common to many independent Protestants and pro-Vatican Catholics throughout the Maoist era. They ignored what they could not change, while making use of the situation to preserve their strength. They organized cell groups and home meetings at the grassroots level, which later sowed the seeds of religious revival during the reform period³². Faced with political pressures, many Christians used the word *chiku*, literally translated as "tasted bitterness," to refer to their experience of persecution. One Catholic clergyman recalled: "When we were bombarded with the anti-Christian propaganda, we tasted the bitterness. But we did not swallow it. We survived." When the state forced the Christians into a suffering mode, it transformed persecution into a unique opportunity to gain heavenly rewards³³. If a single lesson emerges from this historical experience, it is that these Christians had successfully established highly autonomous and diffused worshipping communities according to their needs, despite persistent interference and systematic control from the state.

These stories of church-state interactions suggest that Christian conversion was a

challenge to Maoism. In an authoritarian society where the state equated religious identification with political and ideological loyalty, the act of conversion was a resistance against the state. The Maoist state was very hostile towards any ideology and effective organization outside the control of the government. The church was viewed as a threat to the socialist state because of its religious doctrine, its emphasis on the autonomy of the church, and its effective organization and widespread network³⁴. Given the impetus to place religious communities under state control in the past, tension and conflict will always affect the church-state relations in contemporary China.

NOTES

¹ Yang, C. K., *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, 381-387.

² Smith, Steve A., "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of 'Superstitious' Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961-1965". *The American Historical Review*, CXI-2 (April 2006), 405-427.

³ Wickeri, Philip L., *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1988, and *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2007.

⁴ Ling, Oi-Ki, *The Changing Role of the British Protestant Missionaries in China*. London, Associated University Presses, 1999, 148-180.

⁵ Leung, Beatrice, "China's Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity". *The China Quarterly*, 184 (December 2005), 894-913.

⁶ Wickeri, Philip L., *Seeking the Common Ground...*, op. cit., 117-153, Ling, Oi-Ki, *The Changing Role of the British Protestant Missionaries in China...*, op. cit., 122-180, and Yeo, K. K., *Chairman Mao Meets the Apostle Paul: Christianity, Communism, and the Hope of China*. Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2002, 152-162.

⁷ The term "Christian Assembly" refers to a community of Christian worshippers rather than a church institution. The term "Little Flock" comes from Jesus' words to his followers in the Gospel of Luke 12:32: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." Wickeri, Philip L., *Seeking the Common Ground...*, op. cit., 162.

⁸ Lu, Luke Pei-Yuan, *Watchman Nee's Doctrine of the Church with Special Reference to Its Contribution to the Local Church Movement*. Doctoral Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992, 248-251, and Watchman Nee, *The Open Door*, no. 20. *The Collected Works of*

Watchman Nee, vol. 55, Anaheim, California, Living Stream Ministry, 1994, 179, cited from May, Grace Y., *Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces that Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology*. Doctoral Dissertation, School of Theology, Boston University, 2000, 272.

⁹ The Shantou Municipal Archive, Shantou City, Guangdong Province, China, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo gong'anbu diyuju* [The First Department of the Bureau of Public Security of the People's Republic of China] (ed.), *Jidutu juhuichu (xiaoqun) gaikuang* [Report on the Christian Assembly (Little Flock)] (hereafter *Report on the Little Flock*), 1-21. The Chinese government claimed that the Little Flock had as many as 870 assemblies with eighty thousand adherents in 1955, but other scholars estimated the Little Flock adherents to be seventy thousand. See also Guest, Kenneth J., *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community*. New York, New York University Press, 2003, 92-94.

¹⁰ *Report on the Little Flock...*, op. cit., 11, 20-21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18-21.

¹² Wou, Odoric Y. K., *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, 187-211.

¹³ *Report on the Little Flock...*, op. cit., 14-15.

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¹⁵ *Report on the Little Flock...*, op. cit., 14-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16, and *Xin Hunan bao (New Hunan Newspaper)*, 17 January 1956, 3.

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¹⁸ *Report on the Little Flock...*, op. cit., 16-17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

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²² *Fuzhou ribao (Fuzhou Daily News)*, 2 February 1952, "The Editorial", *Xin Hunan bao (New Hunan Newspaper)*, 17 January 1956, 1, 3, and "The Editorial", *Zhejiang ribao (Zhejiang Daily News)*, 27 January 1956, 2.

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²⁶ Archives of the Shantou Bureau of Religious Affairs, Folder no. 85-1-53, 1957.

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³³ I thank Fr. Robert E. Carbonneau of the Passionist Historical Archives in Union City, New Jersey, USA for sharing with me this information based on his extensive interviews with many Catholic leaders in China.

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