

House Church Movements and Religious Freedom in China

May M.C. CHENG

The Chinese government has implemented legislative sanctions to regulate religious activity by requiring all collective religious activities to be conducted at registered venues. This paper studies the “non-registered” Protestant house churches with reference to their historical roots and current sociopolitical context. The case study of a house church in Guangzhou identifies the facilitating and constraining factors in terms of its leadership, organisation, resources, recruitment strategies, negotiation strategies and future prospects. As a non-compromising but non-confronting religious movement, the church has enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and ample room for expansion, though it is under close surveillance by local authorities and without legal status.

“House churches” (*jiating jiaohui*) are one of the most sensitive issues relating to human rights, religious freedom and expansion of Christianity in China. They generally refer to Christian communities that conduct religious services without government approval in the homes of believers. By legislation, all religious activities must be conducted at venues registered for religious use and in a manner approved by the government.¹ The problem of control over religious activities

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

May M.C. Cheng (maycheng@hkuspace.hku.hk) is a fellow at the Centre of Asian Studies, and Assistant Professor at the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the University of Hong Kong. She received her doctoral degree in sociology and her major research interest is Chinese religious policy and the emergence of civil society in China.

¹ “Regulation Governing Venues for Religious Activities,” State Council Decree No. 145, State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 31 Jan. 1994.

conducted at non-registered venues by autonomous groups remains a major concern of the Chinese Government.

This paper, based on documentary data, ethnographic research and case analysis, focuses on the factors that facilitate and constrain house churches. All of the ethnographic materials were collected first-hand by the author. To restrict the scope of analysis, this research investigates only the **Protestant** groups. The Catholic house churches face many different questions and are best dealt with separately. As it is conventional in the People's Republic of China (PRC) to refer to Protestantism as Christianity (*Jidujiao*) and Roman Catholicism as Catholicism (*Tianzhujiao*), this article follows the same convention without any intention to undermine Catholics as Christians.

The case study of a house church in Damazhan, Guangzhou, is employed to identify the growth strategies of these house churches and their differentiation from officially-registered churches. The Damazhan Church is the best-known Protestant house church in China. It is well known for its ability to resist political pressure while maintaining most of its activities in an open manner. Though Damazhan has had a rather unique experience, a thorough examination of its leadership, organisation, resources, recruitment strategies, and future prospects is still useful in understanding the growth factors of house churches in general, and how they have come to be regarded as a form of social movement resisting pressure from the government and established religious institutions.

It is debatable whether house churches in China can be regarded as a nationwide movement with a common goal to resist government control over religious and spiritual matters. This paper argues that at the microscopic level, internal and local factors differentiate house churches in their speed of expansion and goals. However, at a macroscopic level, house churches face similar political pressures and their networks form a moral alliance in their resistance to state control. House churches are not isolated local phenomena, but are networked groups that exhibit characteristics of a social movement. Groups with similar doctrinal beliefs are often closely networked while groups with major differences in beliefs are more independent or, at times, antagonistic.

House Church Movements in China

Many Protestant groups outside the officially sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM)² have grown very rapidly since the end of the Cultural Revolution

² The TSPM refers to the *Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui* (The Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches in China), commonly called by its shortened title *sanzi* ("Three-self"). It was officially established in 1954 to make the Protestant churches in China conform to the ideology and organisation of the new political system.

and consequently some authors employ the term “house church movement” to describe the development of a Christian force outside the control of government authorities. Some authors argue that there are more Christians in the house churches than in the TSPM churches and, hence, house churches should be regarded as the mainstream of Christianity in China.³ They consider the development of house churches as a rapidly growing nation-wide religious movement while others see the phenomenon as only sporadic and resulting from variation in local circumstances. To avoid the loaded word “movement,” Hunter and Chan suggest the term “autonomous Christian communities,” for two reasons. First, these so-called house churches do not necessarily worship in private homes. Some are quite large and organised, and may worship in designated buildings or halls. Second, the term “movement” may be misleading because these groups do not form a coherent structure with a single leadership, purpose or ideology. Nor do they form a united anti-government clandestine organisation.⁴ While Hunter and Chan are correct in their observations about house churches, their definition of a “movement” may be too narrow.

Social movements may be defined as “**unconventional groups** that have varying degrees of **formal organisation** and that attempt to produce or prevent radical or reformist types of **change**.”⁵ First, organisation is one of the main dimensions of social movements. Formal organisation means the existence of a hierarchy of authority with a clear distinction between leaders and followers as well as between different levels of leadership. The clearer the authority structure, the more organised the movement. In China, house churches do have a formal organisational structure and full-time staff appointed as leaders. In cases such as the Damazhan Church, the “Apostolic Church” described in Hunter and Chan, the autonomous group led by Pastor Alan Yuan in Beijing, and Pastor Li’s house church in Shanghai, formal structure and hierarchical leadership are clearly visible.

Second, being unconventional or non-institutionalised is also an essential defining characteristic of social movements. Unconventional group action refers to group behaviour that is non-traditional, not tolerated, not established or accepted by the larger society, and which may be illegal. In the United States in the 1960s, a religious movement known as the Pentecostals was outside the established Protestant churches and marginal to the larger society, and hence, may be considered as a non-institutionalised movement.

³ Jonathan Chao, president of the China Ministries International (Taipei and Los Angeles), is a prominent advocate of this position.

⁴ Alan Hunter and Chan Kim-kwong, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 81.

⁵ J. L. Wood and M. Jackson, *Social Movements: Development, Participation, and Dynamics* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1982), p. 3 (bold type added).

The Pentecostal movement however does not pose a threat to the US society or the established authorities. In contrast, autonomous house churches in China do pose definite threats to the TSPM and the government authorities and therefore should be regarded as more non-institutionalised movements. (This will become clear as the discussion in this paper unfolds.)

Third, social movements are closely related to social change. They are often formed because of dissatisfaction with the status quo. However, there are also conservative movements that attempt to maintain the status quo and do not attempt to improve or worsen the circumstances of deprived groups. They are formed because of dissatisfaction with groups aiming to alter the status quo.⁶ The ideology common to house churches in China is the maintenance of non-interference by the state towards the expression of religious faith, as was the situation fostered by the Guomindang government before 1949. House churches are under severe pressure to comply with the new measures of control stipulated by the communist government. Informal alliances and networks are often formed among house churches in the process of struggle against the authorities. An examination of the situation of house churches against the current religious policy in China sheds light on the common predicament of house churches. The case study of Damazhan here shows how religious policy is applied by the authorities and resisted by the church in relation to varying political climates.

The Chinese Policy of Freedom of Religious Belief

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, Chinese citizens were promised the freedom of religious belief, together with freedom of speech, freedom of demonstration, freedom of abode, etc. The government was not opposed to religious belief per se, but the possible imperialistic influences connected with Western religions. The policy of “freedom of religious belief” was first institutionalised in Article 5 of the Common Platform (draft constitution passed in the first Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 1949). Then in Article 88 of the first constitution of the PRC (1954), it says: “Every citizen of the PRC has the freedom of religious belief.” This article has remained relatively intact in the subsequent revisions of the constitution. It expresses the basic position of the Chinese government towards religion. Except for the Cultural Revolution period and two years immediately following the arrest of the Gang of Four, the article has served as a premise whereby religious laws and legislation are derived.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–6.

The Current Constitution and Religious Policy

Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution of the PRC grants freedom of religious belief to all Chinese citizens as follows:⁷

1. Citizens of the PRC enjoy freedom of religious belief.
2. No organ of state, mass organisation, or person is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not to believe in religion. It is impermissible to discriminate against any citizen who believes or does not believe in religion.
3. The state protects legitimate religious activities. No person is permitted to use religion to conduct counter-revolutionary activities or activities which disrupt social order, harm people's health, or obstruct the education system of the country.
4. Religion is not subject to the control of foreign countries.

As Bush has rightly pointed out, what is granted here is freedom of religious "belief."⁸ Religious practice, propagation, etc. are not mentioned. In Article 35 of the constitution, it is said that Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of speech, publication, assembly and association, procession and demonstration. The fact that religious freedom is dealt with in a different article implies that the freedom granted in Article 35 does not apply to religion. Having this understanding in mind, we may proceed to examine some terms of reference and how Article 36 should be interpreted.

First, the term "religion" needs to be defined. Religion must be differentiated from superstition. Religion has a complete and systematic philosophy and doctrine, a sophisticated organisation, assemblies, systems, rites, and activities. Religion is a way of viewing the world, while feudal superstition is a means by which some people practise fraud.⁹ The Chinese government accepts five institutional religions: Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism and Daoism. These religions have long taken root in China and have significant international influence, except for Daoism. When implementing the policy of "freedom of religious belief," the state is referring to believers of these five religions only.

In an article entitled "Religion and Feudal Superstition," the authorities clearly maintain that superstitions must be eliminated.¹⁰ Feudal superstitions generally

⁷ Donald MacInnis, trans., *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (NY, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), pp. 34–5.

⁸ Richard C. Bush, Jr., *Religion in Communist China* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 15.

⁹ Ya Hanzhang, "Carry Out the Policy of Freedom of Religious Belief and Oppose Feudal Superstitious Activities," *Guangming ribao* (Guangming Daily), 20 Apr. 1981. Collected in Donald MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (NY, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), pp. 403–5.

¹⁰ "Zongjiao he fengjian mixin" (Religion and Feudal Superstition), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 15 Mar. 1979. See analysis in Jonathan Chao, "China's Religious Policy," *China and the Church Today* 1, No. 3 (1979): 1–3, 4–5.

concern sorcerers, magic potions and drugs, divination and fortune-telling, getting rid of calamities and praying for rain, praying for children, exorcism and healing, physiognomy and palm reading, geomancy, and other such activities. These superstitions were almost eliminated during the Cultural Revolution but have since been revived. The authorities “certainly cannot permit them (sorcerers) mistakenly to invoke freedom of religious belief for carrying out feudal, superstitious activities.”

While this differentiation between religion and superstition seems to make perfect sense, it should be noted that certain practices within the frame of the five approved religions are prohibited as they are considered superstitious. For example, some Christian groups also practise healing and exorcism through prayer. There are examples of prohibition clauses in the regulations for normal religious activities issued by a provincial committee of the TSPM.¹¹ The dividing line is not always clear and the local cadres sometimes use the grey area to suppress religious activities.

Second, Article 36 states that only those religious activities that are “legitimate” enjoy freedom and protection from the state. Religious activities that are not considered normal or legitimate are not protected. The Article also stresses that in order to protect legitimate religious activities, criminal or counter-revolutionary activities taking shelter under the name of religion must be eliminated. Thus, the definition of what is normal or legitimate becomes crucial to the implementation of this policy. One example of counter-revolutionary activities is foreign infiltration, i.e., the use of religion to further the political interests of foreign powers. This sort of activity is definitely to be suppressed.

Document 19

For the state’s interpretation of Article 36, one must consult *Document 19* of 1982. This lengthy document, entitled “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During the Socialist Period of our Country,” was issued by the Central Committee of the CCP and internally circulated to Party organs of all levels at about the same time as the revised Constitution.¹² According to the Document, all religious activities should be conducted and managed by patriotic religious organisations under the directives of the Party and state. As Document 19 is the most definitive statement on the current religious policy of the PRC, all researchers focusing on religion in China allude to this document but unfortunately none has given it a thorough analysis in relation to the legitimacy of house churches.

¹¹ The provincial committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Shanxi, for instance, has issued such prohibition among nine regulations set in Jan. 1987.

¹² MacInnis, *Religion in China*, pp. 8–25.

Document 19 is arranged in twelve sections. Rather than summarising the entire document, the following twelve points (extracts in paraphrase) which pertain particularly to the status of Protestantism are highlighted.

1. Religion is a historical phenomenon of social evolution, having a process of emergence, development and disappearance. It will naturally disappear only after an extensive development of socialism and communism. But it is unrealistic to think that it will disappear quickly. Exercising coercive means to eliminate religion is both harmful and against the Marxist approach to religion.
2. All religions in China were, at some stage, instrumental to the ruling class or imperialistic powers. But a basic transformation has taken place after liberation. Now religion is merely a contradiction of the people.
3. The CCP exercised intelligent leadership in religious work during the initial period. Foreign imperialism was eradicated from Christianity through promoting the Three-Self Principle. But leftist influence gradually developed after 1957 and negated the Party's religious policy during the Cultural Revolution. Since the correct direction was restored after the Third Plenum, our current task is to oppose leftist inclination, but at the same time, avoid liberalism.
4. The basic policy of the Party is to protect freedom of religious belief, meaning the freedom to believe in a religion and not to believe in any religion. But as Party members, we should persist in propagating atheism. No persons should be forced to believe. Youth under the age of 18 should be prohibited from religious indoctrination.
5. Religious professionals who were falsely accused must be rehabilitated. Education about the Three-Self Principle needs to be strengthened among Protestant and Catholic personnel. All religious personnel, particularly the well known and intellectuals, should be provided with a reasonable means of living.
6. The reasonable arrangement of places for religious activities is crucial to the implementation of religious policy. In restoring temples and churches, public resources cannot be used without government approval. If the believers voluntarily raise money for building, they should be discouraged and religious building projects should be kept to the minimum. Normal religious practices should be protected, whether they are conducted in designated religious buildings or in the homes of believers. With respect to Protestants gathering in homes for religious activities, in principle this should not be allowed. But instead of using coercive means, they should be persuaded by the patriotic religious personnel to make appropriate arrangements. No evangelistic activities are permitted outside designated religious places.
7. All patriotic religious organisations should submit to the leadership of the Party and state. When a problem arises, cadres should play a supportive role in helping religious personnel solve their problems instead of taking over.
8. Religious training institutions should be well managed to train young patriotic religious personnel who support socialism and the leadership of the Party.

9. The policy of freedom of religious belief does not mean that Party members can believe in religion because they are not ordinary citizens. Party members are not permitted to believe in a religion or participate in religious activities, though special considerations can be given to members of minority nationalities.
10. The protection of normal religious activities also means to attack criminal or counter-revolutionary activities taking shelter in the name of religion.
11. Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism have significant international status. Extending international exchange in the religious circle has a significant role in the expansion of our political influence. Yet, overseas infiltration through religion must be suppressed. Funding from overseas religious organisations should not be accepted. Government authorities at a provincial or prefectural level must approve large sums of voluntary donations from believers abroad.
12. The leadership of the Party in religious work should be strengthened through developing a team of religious theorists armed with Marxism. But if articles concerning religion are published for the media, care must be taken to avoid contradictions in our religious policy or hurting the religious sentiment of believers.

Document 19 (Section 1) clearly reflects the fact that the Marxist view of religion is still the guiding principle. The basic position of the CCP towards religion remains conservative and the aim of the policy is to gradually eliminate the conditions for religion to develop so that religion may disappear “naturally.” Section 4 elaborates upon the meaning of freedom of religious belief, stressing that such freedom does not extend to youth below the age of 18 or to Party members (also stressed in Section 9). Section 5 affirms that the state’s religious policy is in line with the united front strategy of the CCP. It is said that “Marxists and patriotic believers can, and indeed must, form a united front in the common effort for socialist modernisation.”

Section 6 is a major statement concerning religious life at the grassroots level. It stipulates that all “normal” religious activities, whether held in places so designated or in the homes of believers according to their religious custom, should be conducted by religious organisations or believers and should not be interfered with by others. However, it is not clear which kinds of religious activities conducted in the homes of believers are considered normal or according to custom. Home meetings of Protestants (but not other religions) are named as non-permissible in principle, but should not be banned completely. Rather, they ought to be persuaded to make “more appropriate” arrangements, presumably joining the registered churches. What if the persuasion fails? The document gives no further guidelines. Some Protestant leaders argue that house churches are part of the religious tradition of Protestantism and take this as permission for such activities. This problem of believers meeting in the homes is a delicate one. It may require ample room for circumstantial decisions. However, leaving the case open for differential treatment may depend too much upon the local authorities,

defeating the purpose for any central policy. Nevertheless, the recommendation to avoid harsh and rigid measures in banning home meetings is a positive step in accepting variations in religious expression.

Section 10 makes clear that illegitimate activities must be suppressed. If freedom means being protected, the absence of such protection of activities outside the “normal” range implies the lack of freedom for those activities. “Abnormal” activities may, at times, be condemned as “counter-revolutionary” or “criminal,” depending on the level of control required by the party or the broadness of the united front. While it is quite correct to state that no Chinese citizens have been put in jail for religious reasons, the truth is that many religious personnel have been jailed for being counter-revolutionary, particularly in the 1950s when the same religious policy was supposed to be enforced. Although there has been more toleration towards religion since the 1980s and greater stress on handling religious affairs according to policy, attacks and persecutions were not rare, particularly during political campaigns.

Document 6

The nineties were marked by major progress in the drafting of religious laws and regulations. Since the relatively liberal atmosphere of the 1980s resulted in the rapid growth of religion, it was necessary to develop more regulations to assist the implementation of religious policy. *Document 6* was issued in early 1991, and it emphasises the need for stricter control over contacts with foreign religious bodies and suppression of criminal activities under the name of religion. Since Document 6 affirms the state’s religious policy as defined by Document 19, it is not a new policy but a supplement statement to emphasise certain parts of the already-enforced policy. The Document has six sections, stating concerns for the prohibitions implied in the policy of freedom of religious belief. In particular, a lot of weight is given to suppressing illegal activities and foreign infiltration, managing religious affairs by law, and intensifying political education among religious personnel as well as the masses. Mao’s theory of contradiction is applied in differentiating illegal religious activities that are “hostile forces” and in isolating their chief leaders for attack. Section 2 is particularly noteworthy for specifying the different levels of authorities required in managing different tasks:

Religious affairs must be administered according to the law. To prevent unlawful activities and infiltration (*shentou*) from abroad, registered religious venues must be under the administrative leadership of the government and management of patriotic religious organisations. Government authorities at or above the county level must approve new venues. Evangelistic activities of the self-appointed preachers and all other unlawful evangelistic activities must be stopped. Control must be strengthened over religious material from abroad. Visits and large donations from religious

organisations or believers abroad must be approved by the RAB [Religious Affairs Bureau] of the State Council, which must speed up the drafting of religious laws and regulations.¹³

It is noteworthy that this policy statement requires all registered venues to be brought under the “administrative leadership” of the government and patriotic religious organisations, i.e., the TSPM and China Christian Council with respect to Christianity. In 1994, Premier Li Peng issued two decrees concerning religion, and the RAB of the State Council issued a circular concerning the registration procedures of the venues for religious activities. This is the apparent progress following the directives laid down in Document 6.

Decree Nos. 144 and 145

The State Council issued two decrees on managing religious activities of foreigners and managing religious venues on 31 Jan. 1994. *Decree No. 144* “Regulations on the Management of the Religious Activities of Foreigners within China’s Borders” defines the permitted religious activities of foreign nationals. The regulations also apply to PRC citizens who normally reside outside mainland China, and residents of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Foreigners are permitted to attend religious activities only at registered places. They may preach or lecture on the Scriptures by invitation from religious bodies at or above provincial, autonomous regional, or municipal level. They are not allowed to set up any religious organisations, recruit students on their own initiative, or evangelise Chinese citizens. Only the RAB or relevant departments at or above the county level are to deal with foreigners violating these regulations.

This new decree brings the religious activities of foreigners, including all who normally reside outside China, back under a certain level of control. Previously, Chinese residents of Hong Kong and Macau were seldom regarded as foreigners. There was no prohibition against their visit or stay in counties or villages not opened to foreigners. Neither Document 19 nor Document 6 deals specifically with their participation in religious activities at unregistered places.

Decree No. 145 “Ordinance for the Management of Venues for Religious Activities” rules that all places for religious activities have to be registered. It also requires that a management body be set up for each of these places. Once registered, they are legally endorsed for conducting normal religious activities and receiving donations. On one hand, the decree provides greater protection to registered religious places by stressing their legal status, thereby safeguarding their activities and resources from any hostile local forces. Article 8 of the ordinance states that “the property and income of a place for

¹³ Extract of Section 2 of Document 6 (author’s translation).

religious activities are to be administered and used by its own management body. No other units and individuals are allowed to seize or transfer them gratuitously.” On the other hand, the decree tightens control over any activities outside the normal range, regardless if they are conducted within registered places. For instance, Article 11 requires prior approval from government authorities for any physical alterations or new construction within the registered places, and for running any new enterprises, services, exhibitions, or other activities involving the media. But the Ordinance does not specify the conditions for such activities to be approved. It will be up to the local cadres to apply the regulation in a strict or loose sense since Article 18 states that “the People’s Government at provincial, autonomous regional and municipal level may, based on these regulations and in connection with the actual local situation, formulate ways to implement these regulations.”

All in all, the appearance of these two decrees is a major advance in legislation for religion. Unregistered religious activities have, in recent years, spread to such an extent that a total suppression would cause large-scale conflicts. But the state would like to keep new religious venues to the minimum as implied in Section 6 of Document 19. So the question arises over which ones should be allowed for registration and, hence, legalised. Since there has been a lack of mutual trust between the autonomous religious leaders and the government, Decree No. 145 in fact places both parties in a dilemma. In the context of Christianity, many unregistered house churches have been in operation for years and are not prepared to ally with the patriotic religious bodies. Whether registration means being brought under government regulation through the supervision of these patriotic organisations in conjunction with the RAB is not clearly stated in the Decree as it is in Document 6.

In an interpretative statement from the RAB of the State Council, special reference is made to the registration of house churches. It is said that Christians have a tradition of meeting in their homes with family members, a few relatives and neighbours to read the Scriptures and pray. These traditional simple home meetings are not targets of management under the Ordinance. However, in recent years there appear, mostly in rural areas, to be places conducting large-scale meetings with tens, hundreds, or even thousands of people gathering for worship, celebration of religious festivals, and evangelism. These activities are beyond the traditional practice of home meetings, and must come under the regulations stated in the Ordinance.¹⁴ This statement clarifies what has been left uncertain in Section 6 of Document 19, and is authoritative in deciding whether the activities of the house churches are legitimate, and which types of home meetings require registration.

¹⁴ “Liangge zongjiao fagui xuexi xuanchuan cailiao” (Study and Propaganda Materials for the Two Religious Ordinances), State Council Religious Affairs Bureau, 14 Apr. 1994, p. 26.

However, recognising and declaring home gatherings to be part of the tradition of Christianity does not end the threats. To the house church leaders, Document 6 has a strong effect, and they see Decree No. 145 as a means to bring them under the control of the RAB and TSPM. It is therefore not surprising to find house churches resisting the new registration scheme.

For the purpose of implementing Decree No. 145, the RAB of the State Council issued a Notification on “Registration Procedures for Venues for Religious Activities” on 13 Apr. 1994. Article 11 of this document rules that places registered must submit an annual management report to the RAB in the first quarter of each year, i.e., the granting of registration must be reviewed from period to period.

On the surface, Decree No. 145 and the Notification on registration procedures appear to be merely a set of administrative regulations. Actually, as pointed out by a senior Chinese cadre, the control over religious venues imposes control over the occupant organisations. A religious venue is not just a place or a building, but an organisation. The government avoids mentioning associations or organisations because it is unwise to exercise control over religious institutions by law. However, giving up control is equally impossible. Hence, the term “association” or “organisation” is replaced by “activity venue” (*huodong changsuo*). Such a change of concept gives the government even greater authority over religious organisations, activities, and venues.¹⁵

Historical Emergence of House Churches

Before 1949, the term “house church” was seldom used. Instead, the term “home-meetings” (*jiating juhui*) was employed. In the history of Protestant Christianity in China, there were two movements enhancing home-meetings, namely the “Independent Church Movement” (1902–19) and the “Chinese Indigenous Church Movement” (1919–27). Both encouraged the spirit of independence.¹⁶ In the earlier movement, native lay Christian leaders wanted to free themselves from foreign missions and establish their own congregations independent from the missionary and mainline churches. In the latter, leaders in the mainline churches saw the need to reform church organisation, leadership, and theology so that “foreign religion” could be rooted in Chinese soil. Leaders from various denominations, in particular the Presbyterian and Congregational, jointly established the “Church of Christ in China” (*Zhonghua jidujiaohui*) in an attempt to

¹⁵ “Zongjiaofa de liding yu jiaohui de fazhan” (The Making of Religious Law and the Development of the Church), *Zhongguo yu fuyin* (China and the Gospel) 7 (1995): 4.

¹⁶ Jonathan Chao, ed., *The China Mission Handbook* (Hong Kong: Chinese Church Research Center, 1989), p. 45.

wash out the foreign stigma of western denominations.¹⁷ The Church of Christ in China closely parallels its counterpart in the west in terms of ecclesiastical order and organisation. The spirit of independence, nevertheless, picked up its momentum and there were many charismatic native leaders in the 1920s. A number of indigenous churches were established independently from the Church of Christ in China, e.g., the True Jesus Church (1917), the Jesus Family (1926), and the Local Church (also known as the Little Flock, 1928). These groups had fewer resources and it was common for them to hold meetings at home.

After 1949, home meetings took on political implications when the CCP began to assert control over religion. The Land Reform Campaign in the early 1950s closed down and destroyed many rural churches. Christians who wanted to continue their meetings could only do so secretly at home.¹⁸ Urban churches were also increasingly politicised and there was great pressure to join the TSPM. Christian leaders who saw the TSPM as a government instrument instituted to control the churches deliberately broke away and set up their own meetings.¹⁹ Churches established outside the TSPM were then referred to as “house churches.”

By the mid-1950s, all prominent leaders who resisted the TSPM were persecuted and their churches banned. Further antagonism and polarisation between the TSPM and house churches resulted. In the late 1950s when the number of churches was further reduced, more Christians retreated to small, secret group prayer meetings. It was then that the term “house churches” began to mean an alternative form of Christianity seeking independence from government control and believing that religion should be purely personal and spiritual.

Wallis describes the emergence of house churches in the 1950s as only the first phase of a three-stage development of the house church movement.²⁰ The second phase came during the Cultural Revolution when all churches were closed. Those who wished to worship and pray could only meet secretly at home. Some Christians who had previously worshipped in TSPM churches also joined the house groups. The third phase came with the arrest of the Gang of Four and reinstatement of the policy of religious freedom. The underground churches surfaced and became an alternative to the TSPM

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of the establishment of the Church of Christ in China, see S.K. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1929; reprinted, Cheng Wen Publishing House, Taipei, 1973), pp. 794–811.

¹⁸ Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁰ Arthur Wallis, *China Miracle* (E. Sussex: Kingsway, 1985), p. 85.

churches that were gradually reopening. Under the open policy and economic reforms, many of the previously existing house churches experienced massive growth and many new groups have sprung up.

There is generally a misconception that house churches are small, rural communities. They come in all sizes and shapes in urban as well as rural areas. Some city-based house churches also operate a network of rural meeting-points through itinerant preaching and pastoral visits. There are house churches that are small, loosely organised, family based home-meetings, as well as large-scale, highly-organised churches with extensive nation-wide networks and sophisticated hierarchical structures. Some are highly dependent upon Christian groups outside the country.

Though diversified, house churches are characterised by their organisational independence from the TSPM. The house church movement generally refers to groups that are outside both the structure and leadership of the state-sanctioned patriotic Christian organisations. Hence, unregistered meeting-points under the leadership of the TSPM should not be confused with the house church movement. There are quite a number of new TSPM meeting-points currently awaiting registration in rural areas. These are willingly seeking an official status through registration and are submissive to the leadership of the TSPM. Their participants tend to be new converts from among the contacts of Christians attending TSPM churches in other towns and cities.

One category of house churches with an ambiguous status are the home-meetings led by TSPM pastors whose denominational background still encourages them to establish separate meetings from the reopened TSPM churches. For instance, the Seventh-Day Adventists are very active in southern Guangdong and some of their house churches are assisted or led by TSPM pastors who used to be members of the Adventist Church. Although sympathetic TSPM pastors assist some of these house groups, the pastors in these groups do not particularly appreciate the TSPM. It is quite probable that these pastors and the house groups they lead would break away from the TSPM if they were able to obtain legal status through other means.

Ideology and Organisation of House Churches

The “house church movement” has no single leadership or coherent structure. While there was an organised campaign in the early 1950s to promote the TSPM, it was impossible for any leader to promote house churches openly because of the political situation. But this does not imply that the house churches fall short of the features of a religious movement. Whether a commonly recognised leadership over the house churches exists or not is insignificant in determining the nature of these groups. Any such leadership would inevitably be persecuted by the government and reduced to non-existence.

In the early 1950s, it was obvious that house churches/home-meetings faced a common crisis — to join the TSPM or be persecuted. While the degree of political

consciousness varied across groups, they shared the belief that human authorities had no right to dictate how God should be worshipped. Quite often these house churches originated from indigenous churches that had no ties with foreign missions. Consequently, they found no reason to join the TSPM and severed foreign relationships. They regarded the TSPM as theologically liberal and spiritually weak, and rejected them for being a tool of the CCP.

Rejection of the TSPM among leaders of house churches is deep-rooted. The founding of the TSPM in 1954 led to the painful persecution of church leaders who did not willingly join this allegedly leftist organisation. There were accusation sessions organised from 1951 to 1953 in which Christians had to denounce missionaries and Christian leaders who were associated with them as “imperialists wearing a religious cloak.” At the outbreak of the Korean War, the authorities called for these accusation meetings which were led within the Protestant churches by Wu Yaozong (known to churches in the West as Y.T. Wu), a liberal and patriotic leader of the YMCA and an appointed member of the first national Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 1949. Wu subsequently became the founder of the TSPM that fostered the *aiguo-aijiao* (love-country-love-church) ideology. However, to the TSPM, loving the church had to be expressed through condemning all foreign missionaries as imperialists (all had left the country by 1951) and severing relations with Western churches and Christians. One well-known indigenous church leader Wang Mingdao openly attacked Wu as a false Christian and for deviating from the truth. Though Wang and many other indigenous leaders had always been independent of Western missionaries and denominational churches, it was inconceivable to condemn the missionaries as imperialists, and it was impossible for Christians to accuse and persecute each other, which was against the principle of love. They saw that the founding of the TSPM had only political purposes. Wang was arrested in 1955 and sentenced to life imprisonment as a counter-revolutionary in 1958. Also jailed was Pastor Samuel Lamb (*Lin Xiangao*) who was a follower of Wang and leading the Damazhan Church independently from the TSPM. Lamb and Wang were released in 1978 and 1979 respectively.

Though the political climate was more open in the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between the house churches and TSPM is today still tense. The situation varies from province to province and is complicated by the invited participation of foreign organisations, including Christian organisations, in the Four Modernisations and economic development. House churches continue to share the common goal of striving for religious freedom in the common sense of the term. Though they do not have a united leadership, the well-organised groups with their extensive networks are often aware of the activities of their allies. While they should not be considered as a united movement, it would be equally inappropriate to treat them as scattered isolated bodies. Evidence from the Damazhan Church case study further supports this point.

Some house churches are so highly organised that they deserve to be treated as a religious movement. For instance, the “All-Scope Church” (*quanfanwei jiaohui*), which originated in a central province, is highly organised with national networks and strategies for expansion across all provinces in China.²¹ In the early 1980s, it began to develop rapidly and core leaders set up a “church council” to deal with problems relating to heresies and persecution. The leaders of the council sent itinerant teams to visit the grass-roots churches and organised “pastoral districts” for the division of labour. Each district may consist of 30–50 house groups. Later, “regional councils” were formed for every ten pastoral districts. Their sophisticated ecclesiastical structure now includes a clandestine seminary and missionary sending apparatus. Their evangelistic work includes Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Leaders and evangelists of this group are often persecuted for conducting religious meetings outside authorised places by the local authorities. Its top leader has been in prison several times and has developed a “theology of the cross” that teaches the converts to follow Jesus Christ in his sufferings.²²

There are in fact many formally organised house churches that refuse to join the TSPM. Hunter and Chan have written about a highly-organised house church formed in 1984 in a mountainous region. A group of believers refused to join the local TSPM church because of the pastors’ misconduct and failure to live up to their Christian standards. As a result they separated themselves and formed their own “Apostolic Church.” This church then grew rapidly and was seen as rivalling the TSPM.²³

TSPM’s Attitude towards House Churches

The relationship between the TSPM and house churches has been changing as a result of the increased diversity within both camps. Since the release of several prominent house church leaders in 1978 and 1979, and the implementation of Document 19 which declares that house churches should be tolerated, the degree of antagonism between the TSPM and house churches has gradually eased. In Document 19, house churches are officially declared “tolerable” but the TSPM is assigned the diplomatic responsibility of

²¹ Personal contacts with leaders of this sect from 1985 to 1995. The sect is also known as the “Rebirth Sect” (*Congsheng pai*) and the “Crying Sect” (*Ku pai*).

²² The top leader Xu Yongze was imprisoned between 1997 and 2000 for being a leader of an unregistered religious group regarded as an evil cult by the Chinese government. His jail sentence has been documented in the “1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China” released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, 25 Feb. 2000.

²³ Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China*, pp. 199–210.

persuading the house church participants to take other options.²⁴ It is noteworthy that this is a “special grace” for the Protestants only. It does not shelter the Catholic house churches that maintain loyalty to the Pope and object to the Catholic Patriotic Association.

As hurtful feelings from the past political mobilisation campaigns fade, most house church leaders have refrained from hostile attack on the TSPM. They would more readily accept that some TSPM pastors possess genuine Christian faith. Yet merging with the TSPM would still be the last thing on their mind. They often look down on the TSPM pastors for their low moral standard, lack of faith, and inadequate Bible knowledge. At the other end, the TSPM pastors are jealous of the popularity of the house churches and are happy to see them being suppressed.²⁵

Claiming leadership over a united post-denominational form of Christianity in China, the TSPM sees the rapid expansion of house churches as an embarrassment. Bishop Ding Guangxun, former Chairman of the national *Lianghui* (Two Committees), explains that there are objective reasons for the existence of house churches.²⁶ First, the number of TSPM churches is inadequate or their locations are too remote. Second, house church leaders think that some TSPM pastors lack love for the church and betrayed the church in the past. The hurt from the past has not yet been healed. Third, sermons are inappropriate (not edifying) for believers. Fourth, the integrity and behaviour of some TSPM leaders and church pastors are in doubt. Other reasons include differences in doctrinal positions and liturgical approaches.²⁷ At the grassroots, the relationship between TSPM and house churches varies from place to place. In Fujian, some house churches can conduct services right next to a TSPM church; some even report of using the TSPM church building for worship with the full permission of the TSPM.²⁸

²⁴ Para. 3 in Section VI of Document 19 states: “As for Protestants gathering in homes for worship services, in principle this should not be allowed, yet this prohibition should not be too rigidly enforced. Rather, persons in the patriotic religious organisations should make special efforts to persuade the mass of religious believers to make more appropriate arrangements.”

²⁵ Zhong Min and Chan Kim-kwong, “The ‘Apostolic Church’: a case study of a house church in China,” in *Christianity in China: Foundations for Dialogue*, ed. Beatrice Leung and John Young (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 1993), pp. 255–6.

²⁶ Literally, the “Two Committees,” referring to the Committee of the TSPM and the Committee of the China Christian Council (CCC), are the only two Protestant patriotic organisations officially established in China. The membership of the Two Committees often overlaps so that the same group of clergy is in control of both organisations.

²⁷ The Editor, “Churches in Northern Guangdong,” *Bridge* 33 (1989): 3–4.

²⁸ Staff of China Ministries International, interview by author, tape recording, Hong Kong, 6 Oct. 1993.

In a speech in 1990, Wang Weifan, former vice-dean of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and a spokesman of the TSPM, discussed the question of meeting-points in some detail. He explains the activities of the house churches in much the same way as Ding Guangxun, and made suggestions on how the state should treat these autonomous groups. He proposed an “attitude of differentiation” in approaching the problem, dividing the activities outside the TSPM churches into five categories:²⁹

1. There are meeting-points (*huodong dian*) that maintain relations with the patriotic organisations and receive leadership and assistance from them. They are organised for the sake of Christians who have difficulty in accessing a TSPM church, or for those who consider the activities in the church insufficient from the perspective of their original denominational background. Their activities should be seen as “complimentary to the activities in the (TSPM) church.”
2. There are meeting-points formed by new Christian communities that have emerged due to population movement and natural religious growth. Rather than condemning these activities as illegal, “there is the concrete question of a policy allowing for new church buildings or temporary meeting-points to be provided in areas where there were none previously.”
3. Sometimes, minor doctrinal or theological differences, or differences in emotional inclination, may lead some Christians to stay away from the church. Religious worship in the spirit of original traditions is still purely religious and should not be considered illegal. The guiding principle for running these “churches” remains “Three-Self,” and entails not receiving subsidies from or being controlled by anti-China forces abroad. In dealing with this sort of activity, “it is difficult to see any other choice than recognising its legal existence.”
4. Some people have been “accidentally injured” in the course of political campaigns which have involved the church. In the past, some people within the Three-Self organisation were forced to be involved in actions that hurt the feelings of the believers and led to estrangement. Some Christians did not want to go to church to participate in activities led by these people. Many who were previously under leftist influence have sincerely recognised and acknowledged their faults and have regained the trust of the believers. But those who refuse to admit their mistakes and continue to oppress the masses remain a problem. The solution is “to do delicate and in-depth work at a political and personal level, so as to help those Three-self members to recognise their mistakes and change their style of work.”
5. Some organisers and leaders of meeting-points make use of the legal status of Christianity to carry out illegal and criminal activities, or make use of the nation’s

²⁹ Wang Weifan, “A Discussion of Current Questions Regarding Protestant Christianity,” *China Study Journal* 6, No. 3 (1990): 29–31.

opening-up to maintain links with overseas anti-China forces, even receiving their funds and carrying out their directives. “The heavy hand of the law must be used against organisers and leaders of this kind.”

According to Wang, the last type is the only category of meeting-points to be condemned in the essence of China’s Religious Policy as delineated in Document 19. His attitude toward the other categories is toleration. He avoided the term “house churches,” deliberately maintaining that there is only one Protestant Church in China, though thousands of non-affiliated meeting-points.

With respect to the illegal activities under the name of Christianity, Wang’s speech demonstrates how the united front tactics work within this context. He is careful to minimise and isolate the “enemies” and to create a united front with all others. It is worth noting in detail Wang’s suggestions for dealing with the last category of “illegal and criminal” activities:

... a differentiation must be made between organisers and leaders of this kind, and the broad mass of believers; we must distinguish contradictions between ourselves and the enemy from contradictions among the people, differentiate between the illegal and political activities of bad elements and the religious activities of the mass of believers. In other words, at the same time as attacking bad elements, no public disaster should be proclaimed, neither should meeting-points where the masses are carrying out religious activities be declared forbidden or outlawed. This is the only way to successfully isolate and attack those individuals, the tiny minority of bad elements, and conversely to successfully unite the mass of believers. Moreover, in making an attack against a bad element, investigation should be made to produce evidence to show the mass proof of crime, so as to educate the broad masses of believers. If hasty action is taken, and someone is arrested and then released again, it could in fact have the opposite effect of vainly increasing the believers’ trust in this sort of person. On a nation-wide scale, this sort of “clumsy treatment,” leaving ourselves in a passive position, is not restricted to one or two cases.³⁰

Wang made this speech in 1990 possibly as a response to the government crackdown on house churches after the June 4th incident. His friendliness was a good preparation for the requirement to register all religious venues and the activities therein, as stipulated by Decree No. 145 of 1994.

Damazhan: From a Church to a Movement

China watchers from the West often refer to Damazhan as an “underground” church because it runs contrarily to the existing regulations (e.g., registration requirement) on authorised religious activities. Yet, its openness and accessibility are in no way like an

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–1.

underground organisation. This case study is based on participant observations, interviews with the pastor-in-charge, the pastor's writings, and unpublished testimonies.

The Church and Its Leader

Damazhan is a quiet lane off a main street in Guangzhou. At 35 Damazhan, Pastor Samuel Lamb lived and openly operated an unregistered church. For years the local authorities had unsuccessfully attempted to persuade him to register or operate on a church premises. Though Lamb's resistance to register his church created tension with the local authorities, his activity was tolerated and even endorsed in a subtle manner. The authorities relocated his home (and knowingly his house church also) to a nicer building when 35 Damazhan was taken over in 2001 for demolition due to age. Since 1994, Lamb has been running four weekly services, with the Sunday sermon repeated for different congregations (each consisting of about 350 people). In addition, there are Sunday school classes, communion services, prayer meetings, etc. His church is formally named *Damazhan Fuyin Tang* (Damazhan Gospel Church), but within the Christian circle it is simply referred as Damazhan.

The Early Years

Meetings in 35 Damazhan began in Oct. 1950, one year after the victory of the CCP. It all started with Samuel Lamb who was born in 1924 into a Christian family in Macau. His father and his maternal grandfather were ordained Baptist ministers. Lamb's Chinese given name *Xiangao* literally means "offering the lamb," reflecting the Christian faith of the family. In his testimony, Lamb mentions many miraculous experiences during his childhood and youth. At the age of 18 or so, he felt that he was called to preach the gospel and serve God, particularly in Guangzhou. He received seminary training in 1942, but it was disrupted because of the war. In 1946, he worked as an assistant evangelist in a Methodist church in Guangzhou, but theological differences as a Baptist soon led him to leave the Methodists.³¹

From the beginning of his ministry, Lamb has never been a compromising person. After leaving the Methodist church, he earned his living by teaching English and piano lessons. In 1949, a Baptist church in Guangzhou appointed him. Eventually he started his own church in the late spring of 1950, with an initial membership of 30 communicants.³² In October that year, the meeting was moved to Lamb's home in Damazhan. Pressure to support the new CCP government was mounting upon the churches. Christians were uncertain about the future posed by a regime that promoted atheism. Stories of persecution were coming from various parts of the country. During

³¹ Ken Anderson, *Bold as a Lamb* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), p. 35.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

this time, Pastor Lamb, assisted by other evangelists, ran his church independently from any denomination or mission society.

Persecution and Renewal

Between 1955 and 1958, Lamb was arrested twice for being a “counter-revolutionary.” His association with Wang Mingdao who openly resisted the TSPM and attacked its leaders as false Christians made him unpatriotic and anti-government. He first met Wang in Beijing in 1953. Prior to their meeting, he had read Wang’s writings and was an admirer of Wang’s resistance to political pressure during the Japanese occupation. When they met in 1953 and spent two weeks together, Lamb probably found that he shared Wang’s attitude toward the TSPM. He proudly recalled Wang saying: “I am a dangerous person in Beijing; you are a dangerous person in Guangzhou. Your visit here adds danger upon danger.”³³ Though not verbalised, being “dangerous” probably referred to their position from the perspective of the local authorities. Wang was arrested about a month prior to Lamb’s arrest. Both were temporarily released in 1957 because Wang unwillingly signed a confession. After their release, Wang made it known that he was confused and regretted his “weakness.” They were both re-arrested in 1958. Lamb’s second arrest led to a 20-year sentence. The Damazhan congregation disbanded after his arrest. In prison, he experienced a lot of miracles and was kept safe and unharmed even in extremely adverse conditions. He was made to do hard, dangerous work in a coal-mine. In mid-1978, he was released and allowed to return to Guangzhou for the sake of taking care of his aged mother. Wang Mingdao was released in 1979 and the two met again in Guangzhou in 1982. Wang was 24 years older than Lamb and very frail. He remained a spiritual exemplar for Lamb until his death in 1992.

Lamb was not intimidated by the long years in jail. His conviction to preach the gospel in Guangzhou remained strong. House meetings at Damazhan resumed in Sep. 1979, with only four people worshipping together. The first baptismal service was in 1980 and these four were baptised. The numbers grew quickly and in early 1981, the meetings were again packed with people. Pastor Lamb would preach on the upper floor and the people on the lower floor would listen to the sermon through a loudspeaker.³⁴ A communion service was conducted each Sunday evening for the baptised members. In 1982, over a hundred people were attending Lamb’s church. The Public Security Officers summoned him from time to time and told him to stop the meetings because he was on probation for five years after his release in 1978, which meant he was banned from

³³ Lin Xiangao (Samuel Lamb), *Lin xiangao jianzheng* (The Testimony of Samuel Lamb), Book One (Guangzhou, 1991), p. 6 (mimeographed).

³⁴ Samuel Lamb, *The Testimony of Samuel Lamb*, Book One (Guangzhou, 1991), pp. 10–1 (mimeographed). This is an English version of *Lin xiangao jianzheng*.

holding assemblies. Consequently, the major worship session was discontinued for over six months. Believers nevertheless came to him in small groups for prayer and fellowship. Regular worship services resumed in mid-1983 when his probation period was over. Later in the year he was even allowed to renovate his house to make more space for the gatherings.³⁵

By late 1988, the church had conducted 43 baptismal services and baptised 1,364 people. At the time, that church ran three worship services each week with over 300 people at each service, making for a total weekly attendance of 1,000. There was a weekly evangelistic meeting on Thursday evening and a Bible class for new converts every first and third Tuesday evening of the month. The youth fellowship was run every second and fourth Tuesday evening. There was no meeting on Friday evenings and the pastoral team would go out for home visits. Pastor Lamb was proud of this busy schedule and the dedication of the many young people to the Christian faith: "Except Monday and Friday evenings, we have meetings every evening the whole week. Praise God. And most of us are young people."³⁶

The Question of Legitimacy

Registration Requirement

Since late 1988, a few months after the provincial government of Guangdong issued the "Regulations for the administration and management of religious activity places in Guangdong" (*Document 44/Guangdong*), Pastor Lamb was frequently urged by the Public Security Officers to register and join the TSPM, or have his church stopped.³⁷ The Guangdong provincial regulation can be seen as a forerunner or a pilot registration scheme for the nationwide legislation issued in 1994 (Decree No. 145). Between Aug. and Dec. 1988, Lamb was summoned to the Government Hall six times:

But there has been a great change since August 1988. From August until the end of the year, the government called on me six times. The first time was on 5 August 1988. Starting at 9.30 a.m. they read to me the 33 restrictions contained in Document Number 44 of the Guangdong government and in the Guangzhou Document. They called me to register and urged us to stop our church. If I registered, we would be controlled by the Three Self Churches.... Furthermore, the 33 restrictions are in contrast with the religious freedom of the law. So I refused.³⁸

³⁵ Anderson, *Bold as a Lamb*, pp. 137–9.

³⁶ Lamb, *Testimony*, p. 13.

³⁷ English translation of the document, found in *China Study Journal* 3, No. 3 (1988): 41–4. This Guangdong document announces the regulation that at the provincial level, all venues for religious activities are to be registered with the government.

³⁸ Lamb, *Testimony*, p. 14.

Lamb resisted the idea and continued to run his church independently. He did not want to join a mixed group which he believed consisted of non-believers as well as true believers. Lamb argued that Document 19 warranted religious freedom and that Christian meetings at home were legal so long as they did not involve criminal or harmful activities.³⁹ During the last summons in 1988, the cadres questioned him concerning the number of foreigners preaching in his church. He replied that many foreigners visited his church; one time there were 100 Americans joining his service. But foreigners only gave greetings or testimonies after he preached. He assured the cadres that foreigners did not control his church. Most tactfully, Lamb added:

Usually there are just a few brothers and sisters from different countries who join our services. They heard that I preach the whole Bible freely. Through these services, they discovered that what they heard was wrong about our religious freedom.⁴⁰ (It is frequently said in the US that there is no religious freedom in China.)

Lamb has successfully convinced the authorities that his church should be left alone to serve as a showpiece, proving to outsiders that Chinese citizens enjoy religious freedom. The authorities have treated him leniently while keeping close surveillance on his activities. Meetings in Damazhan were prohibited for only a brief period in 1990 due to the sensitive political situation at the time.

Harassment by Public Security Officers After 4 Jun. 1989

The year 1989 was a turbulent one for China. The spirit of democracy and demand for political reform climaxed in the pro-democracy demonstrations and June 4th Incident in Tiananmen Square. During this time, Pastor Lamb suffered from kidney infection and was frequently admitted to the hospitals of Guangzhou. However, he was still faithfully preaching and nurturing his congregation whenever his health allowed. He recalls telling the believers not to take part in the demonstrations because he did not want his church to be banned because of involvement in politics. For some reason, the number of new believers was rapidly increasing during this time. He recalls baptising 169 people one day. It was the 45th baptismal ceremony conducted in two sessions on 8 Aug. 1989.⁴¹

When the government had regained control after the June 4th Incident and the social situation was on the surface settling back to its normal state, Lamb became one of the targets of investigation by the Public Security Bureau (PSB). On 22 Feb. 1990 at 11.30 p.m., over 50 policemen came to search his house and confiscated all the Christian

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16 (words in parenthesis are the author's).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

books along with many other things. Even the list of newly-baptised members was taken away. He was put in detention for interrogation for two days. When interrogated, he stressed to the cadres that he had told his church members not to participate in the pro-democracy demonstrations. He also made the point that the chairman of the TSPM, Ding Guangxun, openly supported the students, but not him. His interrogators replied that Ding was all right because he had “reflected well” afterwards.⁴² Before being released, he was told to be ready for summoning any time. Lamb considered this a form of house arrest rather than mere surveillance.⁴³ Over the following 12 months, he was summoned ten more times by the PSB and meetings at Damazhan were banned. During these interrogations, Lamb was asked about foreigners who had visited the church, the support given by outsiders, and when he would apply for registration. According to Lamb, the houses of some co-workers were raided and some believers had their salary deducted or withheld.⁴⁴

There were several quiet months in the spring of 1991. However, towards the end of the year, members of the Guangzhou People’s Congress and cadres from the RAB came to persuade Lamb to comply with the registration regulation. When he rejected this, he was interrogated five times within four weeks from Mar. to Apr. 1992, then left alone for 14 months. But on 3 Jun. 1993, some officers from the PSB came again and ensured that Lamb and his congregation had no intention whatsoever to do anything disturbing the next day, 4 June. Since then, cadres have sporadically visited him but their demeanour has been increasingly polite.

From the Tiananmen Incident to the Eve of WTO Accession

Actions taken by the government to ban the Damazhan meetings and discourage Lamb and his staff did not threaten the congregation. On the contrary, Damazhan was growing more rapidly. Initially when the “Notice” to ban the meeting was posted on the door of Lamb’s house (Feb. 1990), the worship services were stopped. But the believers came to Lamb every day in groups of 10 to 20 for prayer and fellowship. There were small group meetings at 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. daily. After two months, Lamb was asked by the believers to give “Bible talks” during the meetings. He decided to give them five times per week, keeping the attendance of each group to about 20. In Jul. 1990, the size of the groups increased to 100. The “Notice” was even torn away by someone on 14 Aug. 1990. In September, hymns were sung during meetings, using hymnbooks printed by Lamb’s team of church workers. By Mar. 1991, the meetings were back to normal with about

⁴² Lin Xiangao, *Lin xiangao de jianzheng* (Samuel Lamb’s Testimony) (a short article in Chinese printed and distributed by the author in Guangzhou, 1990).

⁴³ Lin Xiangao, *Lin xiangao jianzheng*, Book One (Chinese), p. 34.

⁴⁴ Samuel Lamb, interview by author, tape recording, Guangzhou, 17 Apr. 1995.

300 people attending each service. Four worship services were run each week apart from the communion service on Sunday evenings. Baptismal ceremonies resumed in May 1991. The congregations at all the meetings were growing and the number of ministerial staff totalled ten.⁴⁵ The number of new converts increased sharply in the early 1990s and stabilised in the mid-1990s. By 1994–5, Damazhan was attended by around 1,500 people each week and seemingly functioning at its maximum physical capacity (Table 1). During this time, the State Decree No. 145 regulating the registration of all religious venues was implemented as a move to increase control over autonomous religious groups. Lamb had obviously found ways for his church to grow despite the tensions with the local authorities.

Table 1: *Expansion of Damazhan Gospel Church from Early to Mid-1990s*

	1991	1992	1993	1994
Number of baptismal services	6	5	7	6
Candidates baptised	265	273	357	332
Weekly attendance	1,000	1,200	1,200–1,400	1,400–1,600

Source: Compiled by the author from information in Lin Xiangao, *Lin Xiangao Jianzheng* (The Testimony of Samuel Lamb), Book Two (Guangzhou, 1994), pp. 16–21 (mimeographed).

In 1997 around the time of the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China, officials from the PSB visited Damazhan several times. During one of my visits at Damazhan, Lamb said the officials questioned him about what he would say to foreign visitors on Hong Kong's return. The government was keen to check Lamb's political correctness but was not so concerned about the registration issue. The officials were satisfied when Lamb said that the return of Hong Kong was right and good.⁴⁶ When the local authorities told Lamb that the three-storey building on 35 Damazhan was too old and had to be demolished, the fate of the Damazhan church was brought to question. As it turned out, the authorities allocated Lamb a new home and unofficially permitted him to continue running the church services. On 18 Feb. 2001 when he held the first service in the new building, about 1,000 people crowded in at 8 a.m.⁴⁷ The generosity of the authorities may be seen as an act of window dressing on the eve of China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In any case, it is evident that such tolerance

⁴⁵ Lin Xiangao, *Lin xiangao jianzheng* (The Testimony of Samuel Lamb), Book Two (Guangzhou, 1994), pp. 16–21 (mimeographed).

⁴⁶ Lamb, interview, 7 Sep. 1997.

⁴⁷ "China: Church Still Persecuted, Still Growing," at News Page of *Link International*, 19 Jun. 2001. <<http://www.persecution.com/link/>> [12 Jan. 2002].

or unofficially allowed gatherings meant that scholars could no longer define Damazhan as an “underground” church.

Other house church leaders do not share Lamb’s high degree of freedom and unofficial status as a church leader. House churches in other provinces, due to different circumstances, have not experienced the same expansion. Even within Guangdong, Lamb’s church is enjoying more freedom than the associated meeting-points. According to a report by a foreigner visiting a meeting-point in Huadu (a town 50 kilometres from Guangzhou city) in March 1995, the PSB of Huadu was much more anxious to attack “illegal, unregistered meeting places.” The foreigner was visiting the Huadu meeting-point with a Hong Kong Christian and two mainland evangelists (staff of Damazhan). During the meeting, officers from the PSB came and arrested the two visitors, two evangelists, and the wife of the householder (who was very sick). All were released after being kept in detention for a few hours, except for the householder’s wife.⁴⁸ To date, the Huadu house church continues to meet but the authorities keep a close surveillance on its activities.

Future Perspective

Lamb is constantly being urged to comply with the government registration regulation. Once registered, Lamb’s church would become legalised but would be governed by the state legislation on management and administration. Recently he was told that registration does not mean that he has to join the TSPM as it is no longer explicit in Decree No. 145 requiring all religious activities to be conducted at registered venues. But Lamb is sceptical:

They (cadres from the RAB) said that house churches in Shanghai and Beijing have registered, but in fact only those groups connected with the TSPM have done so. Though there is no set requirement to join the TSPM when registering now, they may change the regulations in future. Registration means a submission to the administration of the regional authorities, and each region may have a different policy to control the local situation.⁴⁹

Since Lamb has enjoyed independence, though paid a steep price for it through all these years, it is unlikely that he will change his strategy or submit to the authorities. There is apparently an effective communication network between Lamb and house church leaders elsewhere, e.g., in Shanghai and Beijing. House church leaders in these cities also show a lack of trust in the authorities to grant true religious freedom. Lamb remains optimistic that he can operate his church independently not only because of the fellowship of similar groups, but also because of a strong belief in a God-governed future. His firm conviction that no political power on earth is able to overcome the power of God has lent him and his church members great moral strength.

⁴⁸ John A. Short, “The Current Situation” (a typewritten report), 20 Mar. 1995.

⁴⁹ Lamb, interview, 17 Apr. 1995.

Analysis and Concluding Comments

First, the Damazhan Church exhibits nothing less than a social movement and has been successful as a conservative conventional movement that resisted new political forces in the 1950s and refuses to be co-opted by new government policies in the more recent period. With its ideology of submission to Biblical doctrine alone in the expression of its faith and mission, the church faces severe political pressure in refusing an alliance with the TSPM and submitting to the governance of government authorities. Its persistence and moral integrity have gained great credit and won the confidence of its followers. The group became well known to outsiders as well as to the local authorities since Lamb's release after serving 20 years in jail. Though Lamb does not disclose how many meeting-points outside Guangzhou are frequently visited by his staff and are very much influenced by them, he does admit that there is a recruitment and expansion network apart from activities at Damazhan. Damazhan in its own right in terms of its charismatic leadership, dynamic organisation and networks, resource distribution and recruitment strategies could well be identified as a social movement with religious goals. Perhaps there has never been a united "house church movement" in China, but *many* house church movements which are ideologically linked by their aspirations for autonomous expression of their faith. The Chinese government is understandably concerned about dissident forces that resist the leadership of the Party and therefore, by legislation, is requiring all churches and meeting-points to register, including TSPM churches.

Second, apart from being charismatic, Lamb as a movement leader has demonstrated high moral integrity, an important quality that has served to persuade many of his followers. His spirituality is admired by members of his church and has become a model for Christian living. They have followed Lamb's example in resisting threats from the local authorities. As members of Damazhan, they are well aware of participating in illegitimate religious activities which are targets of attack. After the house raid in 1990, some members had their salary reduced or withheld. Hence, they are conscious of resisting the local authorities and their continual commitment reflects the moral strength of the group. Without this moral strength and a underlying future-oriented perspective and belief system, the group would have fallen apart in times of hardship and persecution.

Third, Lamb has applied his political sensitivity most tactfully to the benefit of the group. He has taken great care to dissociate with overseas or local political forces. When he was released after more than 20 years of imprisonment, he could well be co-opted by anti-China political forces. Two US ex-presidents, Ronald Reagan and George Bush, sent him souvenirs through diplomats in the 1980s when he was in great need of resources to develop his church. He kept the souvenirs (a Bible and stationery) but asked for nothing more. He was once invited to join a breakfast prayer meeting of the Congressmen of the United States, but he did not attend in order to avoid any perceived links with overseas political forces.

It is evident that the socio-political situation in China at any given time affects the behaviour of local cadres in implementing religious policy. Lamb is anxious not to get involved with any local anti-government or political activity. His church has never had a legal status, yet his meetings were not banned except for a short period after the June 4th Incident. He set clear parameters for his group and admonished them to avoid politics and criticism of the state. The fact that he requested his church members to abstain from the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989 indicates that there was concern among the members about this political movement and national crisis. Had he or his members been involved in the pro-democracy demonstrations, the authorities would have ample reason to disband his church and treat him as a political leader hiding behind “a religious cloak.” His abstention from political activity was wise. The ban in 1990 was lifted gradually and unofficially (indicated by non-interference from the authorities) as society gradually came to terms with the disturbance. It is worth noting that during this time, there was no change in the written policy. The government’s true concern was for political rather than religious correctness and Lamb fully understood this. Throughout his struggle for freedom and independence, he has never resorted to collective social action that publicly challenges the government. In 2001, he was even rewarded with a new home and more space for the services.

Fourth, Lamb has kept his church organisation dynamic and his recruitment strategies sophisticated. During periods of interference by the authorities, he turned the church services into small prayer and fellowship meetings. While the number in each group was kept small, the number of meetings was increased to cater to the interested participants. It is this dynamic adaptability in terms of format and organisation that has kept the movement growing. As for the content of his message, Lamb is identified as a gifted Bible expositor and his preaching reflects his learnedness. He frequently speaks on the second coming of Jesus Christ, a topic seldom heard in TSPM churches. He very often interprets international political situations, particularly the situation in Israel and the Middle East, in terms of the signs of “the last days.”

According to Lamb, young people make up 80% of the evening services. There are more elderly and rural members attending the morning services, but young people still account for some 50% of the morning congregations. Many new converts from different places outside the city of Guangzhou also come to his church for baptism. Afterwards they return to their local meetings.⁵⁰ Lamb has a very sophisticated cassette ministry. All of his sermons are recorded and numerous copies are distributed to meeting points in rural areas or given to previous church members who have moved out of Guangzhou.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Fifth, Damazhan's extensive communication and resource networks have made a major contribution to its growth. Lamb has won the respect of Evangelical Christians in many parts of the world. With his long years of imprisonment and continuing resistance efforts, Lamb is praised as a living martyr. Many distinguished personalities such as the famous evangelist Billy Graham and American astronaut Jim Irwin have visited his church. Christians in Hong Kong and elsewhere frequently give financial, spiritual and technical (literature and equipment) support to his ministry.

Though the large body of dedicated members also generates constant financial and manpower support, it is probably the significant extra-territorial links that make the difference. Besides the resources needed for his ministry, they nurture Lamb's boldness. He is obviously aware of the importance of this intangible support, for he keeps a detailed account of the dates, names and positions of all the distinguished personalities and Christian leaders who visit him.

His exposure to the media also played a major role. From the 1989 June 4th Incident to the end of 1994, he had 18 visits by news reporters.⁵¹ Hong Kong and foreign reporters are highly alert to the issue of human rights in China after the June 4th Incident and are very interested in his situation. The harassment by the PSB has in fact won Lamb a lot of publicity. An American TV station came to film a programme in Dec. 1991 and in early 1994, a 30-minute report on his church was broadcast on Hong Kong television. By tolerating Lamb's activity, the Chinese government is publicising the degree of religious freedom in China through the media. Hence it is not surprising that his church, being the Chinese government's showcase, enjoys more privileges than the other house churches located in the relatively isolated inland provinces and rural areas.

With accession to the WTO, all social movement organisations in China will enter a new phase of development. There will be a freer flow of resources and opportunities for such organisations to develop extra-territorial networks and contacts with the media. The Chinese government is likely to be even more eager to maintain political control. Hence, social and ideological controls are not likely to be relaxed at the legislative level. However, at the grassroots, should we expect more organisations like Damazhan to operate openly though without authorised status?

On one hand, if other movement organisations could gain political stature and have the same sensitivity and persistence as Damazhan, there is no reason for the Damazhan experience to remain unique. On the other hand, the Damazhan experience is the result of a long process of negotiation and is not easily replicated. Apart from being treated uniquely by the government in order to serve as a showcase of religious freedom, Lamb's political stature cannot be emulated, particularly his long years of imprisonment. He was engaged in a painstaking process of struggle in which he was

⁵¹ Lamb, interview, 1 Jan. 1995.

prepared for personal sacrifice and suffering. Instead of organising any vocal petition or protest demonstration against government policy, he has led his followers in persistent negotiations, demonstrating the possibility of separating religious issues from political ones. By so doing, he has laid the ground for the government to act in accordance with the same principle of separation of church and state, i.e., refraining from interfering with religious activity using the power of the state. This non-compromising but non-confronting approach is perhaps an effective model for other movements that aim to shape civil society in China.