

Christianity in china  
the three self church  
theology religion  
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Dale WilbanksChina ImmersionChristianity in China: The Three Self Church"

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement or TSPM is a Protestant church in the People's Republic of China. Known in combination with the China Christian Council as the lianghui (two organizations), they form the only state-sanctioned (registered) Protestant church in mainland." [1] This is a simplistic description from Wikipedia, to a much more complex cultural development in the Chinese culture. To understand the Three Self Church, you have to look at the history of the Chinese people as well as the history of the Christian church in China. As westerners, we compartmentalize the various areas of our lives, while the Chinese culture integrates their nationalism with all aspects of their lives. Christianity in China. This single phrase elicited many images as I prepared to make my first trip out of my country and first trip to China. I had read the travel site and studied the protocols, yet I still harbored fear from the images of Christians being persecuted and torn from their homes. The true experience while in the country dampened many of those fears and images. China is so old, so complex, dynamic yet subtle, any person that claims to have an easy, simple definition, would be foolish in that assumption. The story of the Church in China is a history of trials and triumphs, tragedies and reconciliation. The Church in China is an old story. Christians have been active in the territories of the People's Republic for over 200 years. Mere mention of the Church in China triggers conflicting images in the minds of many Americans, so it did with this writer before the trip there. We hear stories of oppression, yet the Church continues to grow. What continues to happen with the Church in China could be coined as "amazing." In the middle of this history is the Three Self Church. The Three Self Church has emerged as a Chinese-led denomination severing ties with <https://assignbuster.com/christianity-in-china-the-three-self-church-theology-religion-essay/>

Western denominations. The term "three selves," is derived from the idea of self-support, self-leadership, and self-propagation. While many Western Christians do not understand the reasons for the Three Self Movement, it continues to influence the lives and culture of the Chinese people. Many Western Christians see the Three Self church as only a puppet of the CCP to control and maintain the people. This may be and probably is true, yet the gospel is being preached and peoples' lives are being impacted. There are many Chinese Christians that are suspicious of the Three Self Church because of some of the earlier history of the movement. The story of the Three Self Church is in part, a microcosm of the history of the Church in China in general. Since the TSPM is in short, a Chinese national church, much of the current and past information has been carefully supplied by Chinese historians. To tell this story, one cannot ignore the rocky past of her emergence as a national church. To understand this past, you have to have a small understanding of the particularities of Chinese nationalism.

Nationalism is defined as a "subjective belief system, faith construct, or political ideology that involves a strong identification of a group of individuals with a nation." [2] Nationalism as a cultural force teaches that one must preserve one's culture, even to the expense of another culture. Political Nationalism teaches that the physical boundaries of the "state" should be co-extensive with the ethnic boundaries. This is far from the fact in China. China had always been a dominant political power in East Asia, and became a model for civilization, philosophy, medicine and culture. China was a giant world united by a single story. China was the biggest fish in the pond and that allowed a system of government to emerge that pre-dates the

emperors. The early philosophers were brilliant as they developed a holistic  
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vision of physics with culture and politics. The emperor sat on his throne at the doors to heaven and earth where the orderly structure of the law was maintained. Any disruption in that order was analogous to disaster. The Chinese culture and government did not view other nations as equals, but viewed them as lower class barbarians. Until the middle of the 19th century, there was no ministry of foreign affairs, because in their opinion, there were no foreign affairs. Over the course of the 19th century, contact with the West increased. The British were the beginnings of the Chinese distrust of the West. In all of the skirmishes between the British and the Chinese, China was the loser. This domination continued to encourage increased trade across the oceans to the British benefit. So what was the product that the British worked so hard to preserve? One of the premier goods was opium. Their trade routes would by opium in India, sell it in China, and bring tea home to Britain. This increased presence and trade laid the foundation and accessibility of China for the missionaries to begin to spread the gospel. While the missionary's intentions were generally pure, they wanted to spread the gospel; their misunderstanding of the Chinese culture did not serve them well. This caused them to be associated with the conquering Europeans and made them suspect by the Chinese people. The gospel only began to spread when the missionaries realized that it had to be the Chinese that would lead the church. When the missionaries were considered a part of the domination of the Europeans, distrust by the Chinese was always evident. The missionaries could be seen on the gunboats and ships that transported the opium, many times on their way to their churches. Many of the sites for the churches were placed upon land obtained in treaties after military confrontations, so instead of being looked on with favor, many

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missionaries were seen as a continuation of the model of conquest, especially from the aristocracy of the regime. Missionaries were often met with anger and suspicion because of the total lack of respect for the Chinese culture by the invading British. This intrusion of the Chinese culture was in affect an intrusion on their own sovereignty. The tensions in the country increased, skirmishes continued, and missionaries became targets and were often expelled or even killed. In the late 19th century, China began to recognize its own uniqueness and the beauty of their own culture. " The missionary narrative in China is indeed caught up in the development of nationalism in the West and United States." [3] As this nationalism developed, it appeared that Chinese Christians and the politicians began a shared vision, a great China, free from the influence of the West. The long existence of a " Chinese" Christianity prior to the European incursion satisfied Chinese Christians during a violent anti-Christian movement of the early 1920s. It allowed them to convince themselves that as Christians, they were not necessarily pro-Westerners. They felt they were recovering a " pure" Chinese Christian past, untainted by Europe. At the same time, in the early twentieth century the British missionaries began to distinguish themselves from their homeland. When they went home, they found Industrialization, outrageous immorality in the inner cities of their Homelands, Communism and a Science that was increasingly hostile to faith. As they started to think of England as a lost place, they started asking questions that in their cultural arrogance, they had previously never asked. I will depart briefly from talking about China, to talk about the evangelization of India. This is important to understand the attitude and the connectedness of the two issues. While the missionary effort in China was broad, it was even broader in the country of India. Because of <https://assignbuster.com/christianity-in-china-the-three-self-church-theology-religion-essay/>

the opium trade, Britain already had a military presence and foothold in India. The Missionary effort in Colonial India was far broader than in China, because of the British occupation. Missionaries were actively encouraged by the Colonial regime. Once again the arrogance of the West was astounding. It was felt that the purpose of Britain was to offer the savage Indians all the West had to offer: Science, Progress, Democracy, and Morality. To the colonialists, the first three were dependent on the latter, which in turn was dependent on Christianization. Since it would be "inconsiderate" for the British to withhold all these gifts from India, Westernization and Christianization were very often, but not everywhere, conceived as one and the same. It was impossible for an Indian to produce a valuable contribution to the colony, as long as the rationality of the bureaucracy was monopolized by the West. The claims of Christianity had no equal in the country of India so the faith carried with it a lot of power. So to accept Christianity was to accept Western ways. Thus a lot of the Indian submission to the colonialists was based in a conviction of the cultural superiority of the West. Guns could only keep Indians quiet, but real submission depended on a resignation to their own inferiority. As Malcolm X put it, self-loathing keeps a caged man from becoming a majestic man. To quote Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and its Fragments*, "Far more than the strength of British arms, it was this alien moral force which British rule had brought with it which was holding India in subjection ... And it was the very alienness of this moral power, its lack of conformity with the beliefs and practices of the people of India, which made it inadequate for its [imperialistic] purpose."<sup>[4]</sup>As the struggle for Christianity in India became more difficult and as Hinduism grew, sites were turned back once again to the East, China. It was out of contempt for

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Western intrusions that this sense of national pride began to emerge. This emergent pride continued to view missionaries as a part of the problem of the West. In 1877 a conference, a missionary conference was held in Shanghai. This conference of the Missionary Society met to discuss mission strategy amid a growing tension between the West and the Chinese. Once again, the Western missionaries did not take into account the culture and needs of the Chinese people and the strategy was viewed by the Chinese as culturally imperialistic. From that conference to the early 1900's saw an increase in nationalism and a growing resentment of the foreign missionaries, who were often seen as the right arm of imperialism. 1900 saw the Boxer rebellion which was focused on Chinese Christians and the foreign powers in China at the time. While ultimately the Boxer was unsuccessful, it did send a message that a sleeping giant was being awakened and ruling or colonizing China was not a possibility. Diplomacy with China had to be accomplished through the Chinese dynasty. These years of unrest saw the death of many foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians. All of the unrest in Christian evangelism helped fuel a rise in ecumenicalism within the mission movement. The group that had the greatest impact in China, more than any denomination, was the China Inland Mission. These missionaries represented more than just a denomination, it represented a host of nations in Europe and America. The leaders of the mission efforts were aware of their failings and were looking for a way to resolve the issues. Tired of the growing rhetoric and lack of response and total disregard for culture, Alexander Michie wrote an influential small book in 1891, called *Missionaries in China*. In this book, he repeatedly attacked the imperialistic attitude of the missionary countries in their dealings with China and other countries. He especially

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attacked those missionaries that, even after the struggles, who continued to teach contrary to Chinese culture. He also attacked denominationalism. He saw that denominations had no cultural context in China. A young anti-Christian Chinese man named Yen Fu came across this book, and translated it into Chinese in 1892, with the hope of helping the aristocracy see the need to fight Christian imperialism. Taken at face value, the book appears to be the voice of a loner. Some Historians have even suggested Michie was "unorthodox" in his faith. However, such a designation demonstrates a misunderstanding of the larger trends within missiology at this time. Michie lay right in the mainstream of thought among the ecumenically minded majority of missionaries, especially as the Indian situation began to increasingly inform the missionaries' actions. In contrast to the Missionary Conference in 1877, the conference in 1892 recognized a need for change in the mission strategy. This conference was the initial stirrings of the Three Self Patriotic Movement. This framework was founded on the conviction that any further work would be best achieved using local leadership and uniquely Chinese forms of worship. It was at Shanghai that the "Three Self Principle" was drafted. The three legs are self-support, self-leadership, and self-propagation. In 1910, the Edinburg Missionary Conference was held and convinced those in attendance that something had to change. Conferences and meetings under the leadership of John Matt helped foreign leaders as well as Chinese clergy to understand that planning and cooperation had to be a priority. Out of the ecumenical movement and the Edinburg Conference, Chinese church leaders and other Christians began to research and evaluate the issue of denominations and the validity of their continued existence in China. The history of denominational imperialism and infighting had taken a

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toll on the image of denominations in China. This research recognized the significance of the denominational variety in the West and even showed historically the process by which these denominations emerged. This was not essential for the Chinese people or the culture. From the meeting in 1892, the plan was to pass the baton to the Chinese allowing them the freedom to develop Christianity within their own cultural context. As the church in China developed in the following years, the roots can be traced back to this conference. The Boxer Rebellion was devastating in one aspect, but eye opening in others. This episode in Chinese history began to set the stage for the development of a truly "Chinese" Christian church. The new church was given no money, was not influenced by any missionary or denominational actions, yet the Church continued to grow. In fact, by 1927 the majority of the missionaries had left the country. Under the guidelines of the Three-Self Principle, the church grew and in 1911, a young Chinese Christian trained in the West, emerged as a leader. C. Y. Cheng did not care much for the West and was sure that the Chinese Christian church was closer to the Church Christ intended than churches in the West. Part of the animosity between the Chinese people and the missionaries, was their lack of understanding and respect for the Chinese culture. One of the aspects of the culture that was problematic for the missionaries and caused tension, was the tradition of ancestor veneration. This practice is done by family members of the deceased to wish happiness upon and show respect for those that have passed before them. Cheng was able, through special litanies and allowing some of the traditional imagery, to help bridge the gap between culture and Christianity and help resolve a tension between the two. By the late 1920's Cheng's popularity grew and his ideas were accepted. One of the ways he

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bridged the gap between Christianity and Chinese Culture was his comparison between the Chinese word Dao, and the Greek word Logos. This correlation between the Dao and Logos along with other ideas helped solidify nationalism in the church and further rejection of Western ideas. World War II greatly diminished the enamor and prestige of the West and allowed the anti-imperialist movement in China to gain momentum. This rising nationalism also allowed the Chinese church to develop their own identity and leadership. In 1910, Reverend C. Y. Cheng stated, " Since Chinese Christians long for more and look for yet greater things, we hope to see in the near future, a United Christian Church without any denominational distinctions.[5] This is the sentiment that was growing in China. In 1922, the National Christian Conference was held in Shanghai. This is heralded as the first real gathering of Chinese Christians. This gathering continued to speak of the need for the Chinese people to unify under one banner of Christianity to rid themselves of the " denominationalism of the West." [6] This conference further called on the Chinese churches and Christians to begin to develop an order and system, as well as liturgy and rituals that would be unique to the Chinese church. Despite the excitement of the Conference and desire to move forward, little progress was made, but the ideas from the conference continued to fuel the fires of discussion. The 1920's saw some trials and difficulties for the early Chinese Christian Church. As nationalism grew and the move towards modernity increased, Christians were treated as a hindrance to modernity and were often seen as anti-nationalistic. This anti-Christian movement tore at the fabric of the new church as leaders tried to agree on how to deal with this anti-Christian atmosphere. Once again,

Reverend C. Y. Cheng offered sufficient guidance to the church. The church  
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began to look and sound more patriotic and began to advance into its own uniquely Chinese form of Christianity, apart from Western ideas. Cheng believed in the church and he believed it could be an integral part in helping ease the unrest in the country. The advent of World War II and the invasion of the Japanese helped the Chinese church to be truly Chinese. Missionaries that had remained left the country and left the churches to be filled by the Chinese people. The close of World War II saw the rise of the Communist party in China. The Communist Party was definitely Anti-Western and Anti-Capitalistic. They saw the West as the root of all evils and their brand of religion unacceptable. In 1950, Y. T. Wu issued the Christian Manifesto. This article was the declaration of divorce from the Western Church. It issued a call to patriotism, to the Three-Self Principle, and to anti-capitalism. The leaders that drew up this Manifesto, called for the creation of a new Chinese Church, one that supported the People's Republic of China, one that was totally free of Western influence and still committed to the Lordship of Christ. This was the birth of the Three-Self movement. In 1950, Chinese Christians forged ahead with the Three Self Patriotic Movement. The Three-Self movement was rapidly adopted by the Chinese Church and a large portion of the Chinese Christians. As the promotions of the Three Self Church continued there did seem to be a consensus among the majority of Christians. As they explored their denominational differences, they discovered they were more alike than different. The 1950's saw, for the first time, a Christian church worshipping with no denominational status. While the larger church, The Three Self Church, carried no intrinsic belief system, individual churches decided what was important as far as liturgy and sacraments. This

movement helped assure the government that the churches would not be  
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counter patriotic to the new republic. The Three-Self Church continued to grow and then with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, all religious life in China was banned, even the Three-Self Movement. The cultural revolution brought a screeching halt to any idea that the Chinese Christian church would be unified. In fact it was just the opposite. Christians began to be persecuted and moved underground. Despite the persecution, Christianity still flourished. It was during these years, that Christians were extremely persecuted, often to the point of death. 1979-1980 saw the end to the Cultural Revolution and the emergence once again of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Rapidly, churches began to be reopened and attendance grew. The Cultural Revolution did seem to be effective in ending denominationalism in China. The end of the Cultural Revolution provided the impetus for the Three Self Church to emerge. In being the official Christian Church of China it is governed by local Christian Councils under the umbrella of SARA, State Administration of Religious Affairs. As attendance increased and churches flourished it was apparent that some governance was necessary. In 1980 the Chinese Christian Council was established to oversee and manage the "registered" churches in China. The function of the council is illustrated in the Constitution of the China Christian Council and reads as such: " Its purpose is to uphold united worship; advocate mutual respect in matters of faith and worship and the spirit of bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bod of peace in relationships among churches." [7] Further the CCC is responsible for the theological education in the seminaries, the administration of literature and the administration and oversight of the local churches. While there is a national office of the CCC, there are local councils that oversee the day to

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day activities in their regions. The Three-Self Churches continue to grow in China in astronomical proportions. This writer, in speaking with one of our lecturers, was surprised to hear that from the start of a new church to 500 people in worship was approximately 30 days. Amidst government control, the church is thriving. This tolerance for the churches is out of a fundamental change in attitude by the government. They realized that spirituality and religion were inherent in a society, so they looked for ways to utilize that particular dynamic in society. They chose to allow religion and maintained that " instead of eradicating religion, it is essential to admit the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism and facilitate religion as a harmonious factor in society." [8] Thus, the Three-Self Church attempts to adapt its brand of religion to co-exist with party policy. In 2008, the CCC/TSPM approved the latest revision of the Church Order in the Constitution. This revision added the Three Self Principle as a model for unity and that there should not be division among the church based on different ritual practice. This Statement of Faith was ratified in January of 2008: " The Chinese Church takes the contents of the entire Bible, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as the foundation of our faith, the main points of which are as follows: Ours is a Triune God, everlasting and eternal. God is Spirit. God is loving, just, holy, and trustworthy. God is almighty Father, the Lord who creates and sustains the cosmos and all that is in it, who keeps and cares for the whole world. Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, born of the Holy Spirit, the Word made flesh, wholly God and wholly human. He came into the world to save humankind, to witness to God the Father, to preach the gospel; he was crucified, died, and was buried. He rose again and ascended into heaven. He will come again to judge the world. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, who

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enables people to know their sinfulness and to repent, who bestows wisdom and ability and every grace, leading us to know God and to enter into the truth, enabling people to live holy lives, and to give beautiful witness to Christ. The church is the body of Christ and Christ is its Head. The church is apostolic, one, holy, and catholic. The visible church is called by God to be a fellowship of those who believe in Jesus Christ. It was established by the apostles as Jesus instructed them. The mission of the church is to preach the gospel, to administer the Sacraments, to teach and nurture believers, to do good works, and to bear witness to the Lord. The church is both universal and particular. The Chinese Church must build itself up in love and be one in Christ. The Bible has been revealed by God and written down by human beings through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the highest authority in matters of faith and the standard of life for believers. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, people in different times have gained new light in the Bible. The Bible should be interpreted in accordance with the principle of rightly explaining the word of truth. It should not be interpreted arbitrarily or out of context. Human beings are made in the image of God, but cannot become gods. God has given humanity dominion over all God's creation. Because of sin, human beings have diminished God's glory, yet through faith and the grace of Jesus Christ, human beings are redeemed and saved, and are granted resurrection and everlasting life. Christ will come again. According to the teachings of the Bible, no one knows the day of his coming, and any method to determine when Christ will come again violates the teachings of the Bible. A Christian's faith and works are one. Christians must live out Christ in the world, glorifying God and benefiting people." [9] The

Communist Party has realized that " religion has a positive societal function  
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and because of this is allowing it to flourish under their umbrella to help stabilize society and maintain control." [10] The church in China is seen as a mission station by the government. Most of the welfare services and humanitarian aid in China is accomplished by the churches. The church's " chief social mission of the Chinese Church is to serve society." [11] The Three-Self Church continues to grow as they move into new experiences. Since the cultural revolution, universities have re-opened, seminaries have re-opened, and churches have re-opened. Numbers are sketchy, but most agree to a number between 40 and 70 million members in the Three-Self Churches. So what does a Three-Self Church look like and what observations of the future can be imagined? The Chinese Church is a dynamic church full of life and full of spirit. In our recent trip, we attended the first church in Nanjing re-opened after the cultural revolution. As we entered, it appeared to be a church reminiscent of a church in the United States. The difference was the joy and hospitality offered to us as visitors. We were given headsets for translation along with Chinese-English Bibles and hymnals. For that hour, cultural differences were laid aside to worship a God of reconciliation. There was but one language spoken and sung that morning, a language of love for a savior that is common to all. I do not write this to romanticize or trivialize the experience, but only to say despite the limitations placed on Chinese churches, God cannot be contained. Before traveling to China, I had heard many negative and cautionary statements about Christianity in China. While some of these reservations and cautions are a reality, the truth is that they are more limited than expected. I am not naïve enough to believe that everything about the Chinese Church is rosy, but the atmosphere is joyful and above my own expectations. We have heard stories of intense

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persecution of Chinese Christians, but there seems to be no intense persecutions of Christians for faith in China today.[12]With that said, there continues to be some misperceptions between what is actually happening in China and what is perceived to be happening. These walls can be broken down by communication and mutual trust. The key to breaking down these walls is to have " a clearer understanding of the Chinese culture and particularly modern Chinese nationalism.[13]All Americans think we have the corner on national pride, often to the subordination of others who hold similar pride in their own country. With this intense nationalism and government control of the Chinese churches, why does the church flourish? There are several factors that have helped this growth. The initial realization from the missionaries that they needed to leave and allow the Chinese Christians to be their own church was the initial spark that began the flame. It was when the Chinese had the freedom to develop their own leaders and own culturally significant styles of worship, that their own identity began and the autonomy of the Chinese faith grew. I believe there is more to it than that. The Chinese culture is a rich culture steeped in tradition and spirituality. The depth of faith in the early pioneers of the Chinese church still echo in the sanctuaries today. This spirit is echoed by Y. T. Wu in the mid-1940's when he said " the church had been used to facilitate capitalist ideas, but I have not given up on Christianity, I have been a Christian for 31 years and I am still a Christian. The Christian faith itself has an inner life."[14]Within this single quote is the depth of faith and national pride that is the cornerstone of the Chinese people and the Chinese church. So what does the future hold for the Christian Church in China? This writer would say cautious optimism. You cannot be naïve enough to ignore the fact that the <https://assignbuster.com/christianity-in-china-the-three-self-church-theology-religion-essay/>



Chinese Church is governed by the party, but you can respect and applaud the progress the government has made in the last 20 years. There are three contrasts within the Chinese church that are fitting to say; " Freedom and caution; openness and mistrust; legal worship and illegal." [15] These three contrasts might speak well to the temperament in the contemporary Chinese Christian church. They have the freedom to worship while cautiously recognizing the limitations that have been placed upon them. The registered Three-Self Churches are free to worship in a legal manner, yet the unregistered churches continue to grow as well. The future, I believe, is a bright future for the Christian Church in China. As young people graduate from seminary and begin to serve, continued change is inevitable, as the spirit cannot be contained. The rest of the world will watch and maybe learn that Chinese Christianity does not have to look like a Western brand of religion, but can be uniquely Chinese.