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IS THE CHINESE CHURCH PREDOMINANTLY PENTECOSTAL?<sup>1</sup>

Luke Wesley

The Wind of the Holy Spirit Will Blow Everywhere

From the East coast to the West coast  
The wind of the Holy Spirit will blow everywhere  
From the East to the West  
The glory of the Holy Spirit will be released  
Good news comes from heaven  
Good news rings in the ear  
Causing dry bones to become moist  
Frail bones to become strong  
Full of the Holy Spirit, we will not turn back  
Step by step we go to distant places  
The lame skipping  
The mute singing  
The fire of the Holy Spirit, the longer it burns the brighter it gets.<sup>2</sup>

The Urging of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is urging  
Distant lands call  
Asking for the sound of salvation to ring in their ears  
Countless pairs of expectant eyes  
Oh, have not seen, have not heard the servants of God  
No matter what you feel  
No matter what you see  
We must declare the good news everywhere

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<sup>1</sup> This is a chapter from Luke Wesley, *The Church in China: Persecuted, Pentecostal, and Powerful* (Baguio, Philippines: APTS Press, 2004 forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> My English translation of song #747 found in Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart] (underground house church publication, 2003), p. 806.

The Lord has already enabled us to see the land  
 Oh, servants of God, you must boost your courage  
 The Lord has already won the victory  
 Satan has been bound  
 Only one step further  
 And we enter Canaan land.<sup>3</sup>

It is now apparent that since the early 1980s the church in China has experienced unprecedented growth. Once viewed as an essentially foreign faith, Christianity has taken root in the Chinese soil. And it has blossomed. If the trends of the past two decades remain constant, by 2020 there will be more evangelical Christians in China than in any other country in the world.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers are agreed that the form of Christianity that has emerged in China is both evangelical in character and Chinese in expression.<sup>5</sup> It is evangelical in that the vast majority of Chinese believers exhibit a firm belief in the authority of the Bible, faith in Christ as the sole means of obtaining salvation, and the necessity of evangelism.<sup>6</sup> And yet this evangelical faith has been expressed in ways that are especially appropriate to the Chinese context. Church life is often experienced in small groups that feature close relationships and family ties. There is a strong emphasis on the miraculous, with prayer for healing taking on an important role in the life of faith. The experiential dimension of Christian spirituality, expressed in prayers and worship charged with deep

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<sup>3</sup> My English translation of song #767 found in Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart] (underground house church publication, 2003), p. 826.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (London: OMF/Monarch Books, 1999), p. 179. In this book Lambert offered what is by all accounts a conservative estimate of the number of evangelical Christians in China: 30-50 million.

<sup>5</sup> Due to the limitations of my knowledge, I am not able to include Chinese Roman Catholics in this study. When I use the terms Christianity or the Church, it should be understood that I refer to Protestant Christianity and the Protestant wing of the Christian Church.

<sup>6</sup> On the evangelical character of the Chinese church, see Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (Wheaton, IL: OMF/Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), pp. 282-283 and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 30-33, 45, 48, 188; Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 82; Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing" in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, eds. Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (London: East Gate/M.E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 195-216 (215).

emotion, is significant to many Chinese believers. And the vast majority of Christians in China worship in “house churches” (or, as some prefer, “autonomous Christian communities”) that are independent of state or foreign control.<sup>7</sup>

Observers in the West are still attempting to understand this burgeoning Christian movement and much is still unknown. It is evident that there is much to be learned from the Chinese church, dynamic, multifaceted and polymorphous as it is, and that we in the West would do well to attempt to understand it more clearly. This is the case, not only because increasingly many western missionaries seek to minister in this great country; but, it is also the case because an understanding of the church in China might shed light on ourselves, our own strengths and weaknesses, and stimulate new insights into our understanding and application of God’s word. In short, a greater understanding of the church in China might help us more fully understand and fulfill God’s plans and purposes for our lives.

In the following essay, I hope to shed light on one dimension of the church in China or, at the very least, to stimulate more thought and study concerning this question: To what extent is the church in China Pentecostal? It would appear that there is considerable disagreement in the West concerning how this question should be answered. On the one hand, *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (NIDPCM) states that there are over 53 million “neocharismatics” (that is, charismatics with no affiliation to the traditional, mainline denominations) in China today.<sup>8</sup> This significant number would certainly represent the vast majority of believers in China. On the other hand, Tony Lambert, in his highly readable and well-researched work, *China’s Christian Millions*, makes this judgment with reference to the Chinese church: “There is a strong wing who are

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<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on healing and the miraculous in the Chinese church is noted in Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism*, pp. 85, 145-146; Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 112-114 and *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 112; and Dunch, “Protestant Christianity,” p. 203 and the experiential focus of the Chinese church is highlighted in Dunch, “Protestant Christianity,” pp. 203, 215-16; and Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, pp. 85, 140, 155. Some researchers prefer to use the term “autonomous Christian communities” rather than “house church.” See in this regard Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> D. H. Bays, “China” (1907-49), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley Burgess and Eduard M. Van der Mass (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 58-63 (58).

charismatic or Pentecostal, but they are not in the majority.”<sup>9</sup> These varied responses to the question posed above indicate that further probing and analysis is needed. Is the Chinese church predominantly Pentecostal? To this question we now turn.

## 2. Methodology

In order to answer our question, I shall analyze the five largest house church networks in China. Based on my own personal interviews with leaders from these groups, additional information gleaned from other researchers, and an analysis of relevant written documents, I will seek to characterize these five groups in terms of the following four categories:

- 1) Non-Charismatic: those Christians who believe that the Spirit’s work flows out of regeneration and who deny both a Baptism in the Spirit distinct from conversion and the validity of at least some of the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10 for the church today.
- 2) Charismatic: those Christians who believe that all of the gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10, including prophecy, tongues, and healing, are available to the Church today.
- 3) Pentecostal: those Christians who believe that all of the gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10 are available to the Church today and who also believe that the Bible encourages every believer to experience a Baptism in the Spirit, an empowering for service distinct from regeneration.<sup>10</sup>
- 4) Classical Pentecostal: those Christians who, in addition to the beliefs ascribed to Pentecostals above, also affirm that speaking in tongues is the accompanying sign of baptism in the Spirit.

I am using the terms listed above as theological rather than ecclesiastical descriptions. The *NIDPCM* tends to define the terms based largely on ecclesiastical considerations. Therefore the *NIDPCM* classifies 99% of the 54.2 million Pentecostals and charismatics who it claims

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<sup>9</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 45. Unfortunately, Lambert does not offer a clear definition of the terms, “charismatic” or “Pentecostal.”

<sup>10</sup> This empowering experience might be designated by various terms, including “being filled with the Spirit” or “anointed by the Spirit.” However, crucial concepts would include the belief that this experience is given by God in order to equip the believer for service, that it is available to every believer, and that it is logically distinct from conversion.

reside in China as “neocharismatics.” The term “neocharismatic” refers to charismatics not affiliated with the historic, classical Pentecostal groupings or to traditional, mainline denominations.<sup>11</sup> Of course, by definition, virtually all of the charismatic house church Christians in China would fall into this category. This system of classification is less helpful for elucidating the specific nature and theological orientation of the various groups in the Chinese church. We are primarily interested in what they believe.

I would also like to stress that my use of these categories does not imply that groups which hold certain beliefs in common are similar in other respects. The Pentecostal movement in the West, as in other parts of the world, is very diverse. This is no less true of China.<sup>12</sup> The church in China is extremely diverse and, while there is value in seeking to understand the theological orientation of the various groups more accurately, I would in no way want to suggest that groups who hold to Pentecostal beliefs and practices in China are similar in a multitude of other ways to their Western counterparts. Since our terms or categories often carry unstated nuances, it is vitally important that we define our terms carefully.

It should also be noted that all of the categories listed above are compatible with the term “evangelical.” With the designation evangelical, I refer to those Christians who affirm: 1) the authority of the Bible; 2) that salvation is found only in Christ; and 3) that evangelism is an important part of the Christian’s mission in the world. As I have already noted, the vast majority of Chinese Christians are evangelical in this sense. And, I might add, all five of the house church networks which we will analyze are also evangelical in nature.

In addition to defining key terms, I would also like to clarify the nature of my sources. I will be working with a variety of oral and written sources. First, I will utilize notes from my personal conversations and interviews with various house church leaders. Second, I will also draw upon responses to questions which I have posed to others who are experienced researchers of Christianity in China. Most of these researchers wish to remain anonymous so that their continued service in

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<sup>11</sup> See “Introduction, *NIDPCM*, pp. xvii-xxiii (viii-xxi); Bays, “China”, *NIDPCM*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 155, speaking of China, correctly note that “within the Pentecostalist movement one can find relatively restrained as well as exuberant groups.”

China might not be jeopardized. For this reason I will describe and list these sources as follows:

- “A”: refers to notes sent to me on August 28, 2003 by a researcher who is associated with a large, evangelical, and generally non-charismatic denomination.
- “B”: refers to notes sent to me on Sept. 1, 2003 by an independent researcher who is affiliated with a non-denominational mission.
- “C”: refers to notes sent to me on Sept. 9, 2003 by a missionary in the classical Pentecostal tradition who works closely with house church groups in China.
- “D”: refers to written notes and oral comments presented to me within the past year from an independent Pentecostal missionary who works closely with several of the house church networks listed above.

A third source of information will come from documents draw up by the house church networks themselves, especially the Statement of Faith produced and signed by leaders of several of the churches listed above on November 26, 1998.<sup>13</sup> Finally, I shall also draw from a number of books and articles which speak to our topic.

The five house church networks which I will examine are: China for Christ, a group with origins in the Fang Cheng district of Henan Province; The China Gospel Fellowship, a group which began in the Tang He District of Henan; The Li Xin Church, which stems from Li Xin region in Anhui Province; the Yin Shang Church, which also has its origins in Anhui Province; and finally, the Word of Life Church, sometimes called the “Born Again Movement,” which was founded by Peter Xu. These groups have been chosen for analysis because it is generally agreed that they represent the five largest house church networks in China.

It is extremely difficult to determine with any degree of precision the size of these groups. Estimates for these groups run as high as 12 million for China for Christ (Fang Cheng), 10 million for the China Gospel Fellowship, five million for the Word of Life, and five million each for the two Anhui groups.<sup>14</sup> My purpose here is not to argue for specific

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<sup>13</sup> See the English translation provided by Lambert in *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 60-64.

<sup>14</sup> These numbers are taken from D, but are also very much in line with the estimates given to me by B, with one exception. D did not give an estimate for the number of believers in the Word of Life Church. B noted that the Word of Life group claims that it represents 23 million believers. This group is quite

numbers, but rather to affirm that all of the researchers contacted agreed that these five house church networks represent a significant majority of house church Christians in China. This is especially significant in that virtually all researchers also agree that house church Christians represent the vast majority of Christians in China today. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that these five groups represent a very significant cross-section or sampling of the Chinese church.

### 3. The House Church Networks: A Theological Assessment

#### 3.1 China for Christ (Fang Cheng)

Let us begin with what appears to be the largest of the house church networks currently operating in China, China For Christ (sometimes called the Fang Cheng Church). The China for Christ Church began in the Fang Cheng district of Henan Province. It has grown very rapidly since the early 1980s and constitutes a large network of house churches which span the length and breadth of China.

On Nov. 26, 2002 I met with the top leader of the China for Christ Network, Brother Z. We met and discussed various items for about an hour and a half and then shared a meal together. While we were eating, Sister D, the second highest leader in the China for Christ Network, joined us.

During our meal Sister D, who was sitting next to me, raised a question about a book on Pentecostal doctrine that I had made available to them.<sup>15</sup> She suggested that baptism in the Spirit, although possibly an experience subsequent to conversion, could also take place at the moment of conversion. She felt the book implied that Spirit-baptism must take place after conversion. I assured her that we were all in agreement on this point and that when most Pentecostals speak of baptism in the Spirit as

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fragmented and it is difficult to take this estimate seriously. In 1998 an article in *Christianity Today* suggested that this group totaled around three million believers (see Timothy C. Morgan, "A Tale of China's Two Churches," *Christianity Today* 42 [July 13, 1998], pp. 30-39). Although it is likely that this group has grown significantly since then, five million appears to be a more realistic number. A and C did not offer specific estimates, but A indicated that these five groups represented a significant majority (60%) of the house church Christians in China.

<sup>15</sup> A Chinese translation of William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton, *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield: Logion Press, 1993).



subsequent to conversion, we actually mean that it is logically subsequent to conversion, a distinct work of the Spirit. Temporally, both could occur at essentially the same moment (as with Cornelius and his household in Acts 10). We continued our discussion and Sister D indicated that their church was classical Pentecostal in nature.

Sister D then stated emphatically that their church came to these classical Pentecostal conclusions, not on the basis of receiving this tradition from others; but rather, as a result of their own experience and study of the Book of Acts. She indicated that in the 1970s and 1980s they were quite isolated and experienced considerable persecution. In this context of persecution they developed their classical Pentecostal orientation. At this time their church began to grow. Today, as I have indicated, the China for Christ Network is widely recognized as the largest house church group in China.

I then asked the group if they felt the majority of Christians in China were Pentecostal. Brother Z answered and said that apart from the TSPM churches and various smaller house church groups, the vast majority were indeed Pentecostal. He considered, in addition to their own church, the China Gospel Fellowship, the Li Xin Church, and the Yin Shang Church to be Pentecostal.

On another occasion late in 2002 I had the joy of teaching in an underground Bible school associated with the China for Christ Network. During one of the breaks, the leader of the school showed me around and introduced to me some of the other faculty members. In the midst of our conversation, I noted that their theological tradition was similar (*lei si*) to mine (he knew of my classical Pentecostal orientation). He stopped, looked at me, and said emphatically: "No, our theological traditions are the same (*yi yang*).” Later, with great excitement, he spoke of the hunger for the things of the Spirit in the churches in the countryside.

This evidence, admittedly anecdotal in character, is substantiated by the responses I have received from the other researchers mentioned. Virtually all of them would agree that the China for Christ group should be classified as classical Pentecostal, although certainly there may be some in this large network that might be best described as Pentecostal.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> B, C, and D all affirmed that the China for Christ Network is classical Pentecostal, although B and C suggested that some might be better termed Pentecostal. A's response was more general, and simply acknowledged that this group and the others listed were at least charismatic and very often Pentecostal in orientation.

### 3.2 China Gospel Fellowship

The origins of the China Gospel Fellowship can also be traced to Henan Province. This network of house churches has grown rapidly since the early 1980s and now has evangelists working in virtually every province in China. I have developed close relationships with a young couple sent out as evangelists by this group. This couple has been very effective in planting churches among village people in our region. They are very open to all of the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10. Their testimonies are laced with references to healing, visions, prophetic insight, and persecution. They also speak of being “filled with the Spirit,” an experience which enables them to face hardships and adversity. While they do not appear to view tongues as integrally connected to this experience, they do view tongues-speech as a valid and edifying experience. If this couple is reflective of the group as a whole, I would say that the group is Pentecostal. This conclusion is consistent with the judgments of the three other researchers I contacted with knowledge of this group, two of whom categorized the group as, at least, charismatic (A and B). One other (D) indicated that the group is Pentecostal in its orientation.

I have participated in a number of house group meetings associated with this group. The following example, an excerpt from my personal notes, reveals a bit of the excitement and sense of community that characterize these meetings.

On December 23, 2002 I participated in a house church Christmas service. I walked through the door of the small apartment, roughly 600 square feet in all, and entered into the main room. It was very simple, with concrete floors and bare walls. The walls were now adorned with Christmas decorations. One banner proclaimed, “*Pu Tian Tong Qing*” (The whole world celebrates [His birth] together). The crowd grew to the point that the small adjoining rooms had to be pressed into service. All told, around 70 people packed into the little sanctuary.

The people were simple, country people. This house church is situated at the edge of a large city. The people living in this area represent village people who have migrated to the city. Urbanization is taking place at a breath-taking pace in China. In cities across the country there are large populations of village people attempting to “make it” in the cities. It was apparent that these folks were marked more by the village than the city.

The service, [led by the capable young Chinese couple noted above], began and a sense of joy quickly permeated the small make-shift

sanctuary. Songs and Scripture readings celebrating Christ's birth followed. It was then my turn to preach. I greeted the crowd, which now seemed like a large family, and began to share about Christmas.

After the short, simple message, a call to accept Christ as Savior and Lord was given. Nine people responded joyfully. There was a lot of clapping and celebration as they moved to the front of the room. I led the small group in a prayer of repentance, commitment, and thanksgiving and followed with a prayer of blessing.

The next stage of the service was filled with a number of truly amazing and very culturally authentic forms of worship. Small groups of believers, usually two or four, sang songs based on Scripture as they performed Christian folk dances. It was incredible - a wonderful form of worship which instructed and edified the entire group. Everyone entered in and the joy was almost tangible.

When the service finally came to an end, the nine new believers gathered together for instruction. I was especially touched by one family. The husband had just committed his life to Christ. He along with his wife and their small one year-old baby stood together. Their faces beamed with new-found joy.

### 3.3 The Yin Shang Church

This house church network began in Anhui Province in the late 1970s. It claims to have over 20,000 distinct congregations and approximately five million followers.<sup>17</sup>

On Nov. 25, 2002, I met with Brother C, the leader of the Yin Shang Network. Persecution was a major topic of our discussion. One of Brother C's colleagues had been arrested a few weeks before our meeting and he was still in prison. After we prayed for this man, Brother C noted that just two days prior to our meeting the Chinese government had conducted high level meetings with various departments within their bureaucracy. In these meetings they discussed their policy toward the house churches. The government officials concluded that they would strictly enforce new measures which demanded that all house churches register with the government. The government attempted to present this new policy as an opportunity for house church groups to register and receive government recognition. During our meeting, Brother C received many calls from his colleagues asking how they should respond to the new policies. Brother C said they would not register, but wait and watch

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<sup>17</sup> D provided this information.

how things developed. He felt that this new policy actually represented a new wave of persecution, not a new opening. In the past, the government had often issued fines for not registering. Now, Brother C stated, they are intent on arresting people who do not comply. Brother C indicated that they would only register if there were no conditions placed upon them. He stated that currently the government was asking for the names of leaders, the number and names of believers, and the location of their meetings. This was not acceptable to him. Approximately one month after our meeting, Brother C was arrested and imprisoned. He is currently still being held in prison.

During the course of this meeting, Brother C stated very clearly that the Yin Shang Church did believe in the baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. He stressed that they seek to maintain a balance between the Word and Spirit. Although I would not say that this group links tongues with Spirit-baptism in the classical Pentecostal sense, they are indeed Pentecostal. This was explicitly stated by Brother C.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that, in a manner similar to the members of the China for Christ Church (and, I would add, the early Christians in the book of Acts), their experience of persecution has shaped their theology at this point.

### 3.4 The Li Xin Church

This church takes its name from the Li Xin region in east central Anhui Province where it was first established. The church was founded around 1980 and was especially strong in Shandong, Anhui, and Henan. It then rapidly spread from this base to other parts of China. One of the strongest leaders of this movement is a woman.

I have not had much personal contact with this group or its leaders. One research colleague, D, who has had considerable contact with the Li Xin leaders insists that this group is Pentecostal, but that they are not classical Pentecostal in that they do not insist on tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism. Another research colleague, A, characterized this group as charismatic with some Pentecostal leanings. B characterized this group as charismatic and C was not able to make a judgment due to lack of knowledge. It would appear that the group is predominantly Pentecostal with some segments perhaps best described as charismatic.

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<sup>18</sup> A characterized this group as at least charismatic with Pentecostal leanings; B characterized this group as charismatic; C had little contact with this group; and D characterized the group as Pentecostal.

### 3.5 The Word of Life Church

The origins of the Word of Life Church, sometimes called the “Born Again Movement” by outsiders, can be traced to 1968.<sup>19</sup> At this time, Peter Xu began to preach in his hometown in southern Henan. By 1979 he was leading a group of evangelists whose ministry was now reaching into other areas of Henan. Beginning in the early 1980s they experienced tremendous revival. Many accepted their message and hundreds of churches were established. In 1982 they began to send teams of evangelists to other provinces. The first teams were sent to Sichuan Province. Initially, a number of these teams were arrested and sent back to Henan. However, in spite of these setbacks, the church persevered and finally a strong work was established in Sichuan. This also became a major center of ministry.

In 1982 Peter Xu was arrested and imprisoned. However, he was able to escape from the labor camp and resume his ministry. In 1983 a wave of persecution came and many Word of Life evangelists scattered to other provinces. During this time they developed a “seven point missions strategy” (see below) and sent out other full-time evangelists to plant churches.

By 1988 more than 3,000 churches had been planted. Peter Xu was re-arrested in 1988 for attempting to meet with Billy Graham when he visited China. Xu spent three years in prison and was released in 1991. Xu was arrested again in March of 1997 and again spent three years in prison. He was released in May of 2000 and now resides outside of China. Since his departure from China, the Word of Life Church has experienced significant fragmentation. In 1998 an article in *Christianity Today* estimated that the church numbered around three million believers. This article also rejected some claims that this group was heretical and concluded that it was evangelical in character.<sup>20</sup>

The Word of Life bases its theology on John 3:3-5 and emphasizes that the only way to eternal life is to repent and have a new birth in Jesus.

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<sup>19</sup> The material for the following historical and theological survey of the Word of Life Church comes largely from two unpublished papers, both produced by Chinese Christians: one paper, “A Case Study of The Way of Life (New Birth): A Chinese House Church Network,” was written in March, 2001 by an outside observer; the other paper, “Our Church History,” was written by a Word of Life Church leader in April, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, “A Tale of China’s Two Churches,” *Christianity Today* 42 (July 13, 1998), pp. 30-39

In some respects they are quite charismatic. They love the “Fire Bible,” the Chinese translation of the *Life in the Spirit Study Bible*, pray regularly for the sick, and are very much attuned to the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

They have been criticized for supposedly emphasizing that believers must cry for prolonged periods of time in order to be truly saved. Thus, they have been called the “criers” and “the born again movement.” It is true that they are very emotional and frequently cry when they pray, but Peter Xu and other leaders insist that crying is not a requirement for salvation. It is quite possible that in a movement this size that some extremes might be propagated at the grass-roots level which do not in fact reflect the more orthodox views of the leaders.

Their theology, described as a “theology of the cross”, led to the following seven point missions strategy:

- Preach the salvation of the cross in order to make sure one repents and experiences the new birth.
- Take the way of the cross to persevere in faith during suffering.
- Recognize that the TSPM embraces a worldly authority.
- Plant churches (this is the goal of evangelism)
- Build up spiritual life (through spiritual life training)
- Build up fellowship (fellowship in church and with co-workers)
- Grow through planting churches (send out evangelists, plant churches, and establish Bible schools).

My first encounter with this group came in Beijing in October of 1998. I had the joy of meeting with a group of eight Word of Life leaders. The eight leaders, who came from their ministry posts in various parts of China, were, with one exception, all young, in their mid-to late- twenties. Most, however, had already been preaching for close to ten years. Seven of the eight were women. Their testimonies were incredibly inspiring. All but one had been in prison. One young lady who had been arrested along with Peter Xu the previous year had only recently been released from prison.

A colleague of mine asked one young lady, D, if she had been mistreated in prison. In a very matter of fact way, she said, “yes, they beat me.” She recounted how the prison officials tried to prevent her from preaching or praying; they beat her and shocked her with an electric baton in the chest. In spite of these difficulties, she was able to minister

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<sup>21</sup> The *Life in the Spirit Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Life Publishers, 2003) was first published as the *Full Life Study Bible* (1992).

to many in prison. One prostitute was healed and accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. On one occasion a guard attempted to rape her, but as she prayed the guard fell unconscious and had to be taken to the hospital. Their testimonies of God's faithfulness and protection were filled with many stories of miraculous intervention.

Since this meeting in 1998 I have had considerable contact with various members of this group. On June 4, 2003 I interviewed one of their leaders whom I know quite well. I asked her about her group's attitude toward spiritual gifts and baptism in the Holy Spirit. She confirmed that they were conservative evangelicals. She also stated that:

- They do not encourage speaking in tongues. Although this may rarely happen, it is not really encouraged and a small element in the group would see it as demonic.
- They emphasize healing, but they do not practice prophecy or speaking in tongues.
- They do emphasize the importance of the Spirit's power in their lives, especially in evangelism and ministry. And, although they might connect this with baptism in the Spirit, this appears to be an area where their theology is not clearly developed. They appear to be open to the Spirit's empowering after conversion, but whether they would describe this as a definite experience available to everyone or connect this with Acts 2 is not clear. My friend did say said they did not emphasize the term, "baptism in the Holy Spirit."

In short, the Word of Life Church represents an interesting mixture of conservative theology and experiential piety. They expect to see miracles, pray for healing, and look to the Holy Spirit for supernatural guidance and deliverance. At the same time, they are generally quite closed to some manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy and tongues. One researcher, B, after classifying the group as "charismatic", put it this way: "Overall, [the Word of Life Church is] similar to the Southern Baptists in theology (eternal security, etc.). Yet the first time I met Xu he was on his way to try to raise from the dead one of his workers who had suddenly died." According to the definitions I have listed above, I would classify this group as non-charismatic. As I have indicated, they do not appear to see all of the gifts listed in 1 Cor. 12:8-10 as valid for the church today.

### 3.6 The House Church Statement of Faith

On November 26, 1998 a group of four house leaders, including the leaders of the China for Christ Network and the China Gospel Fellowship, signed a statement of faith that they had forged together during meetings convened throughout the previous days. This statement represents the most significant theological statement issued by house church leaders to date. It is thoroughly evangelical and organized around seven key headings: On the Bible; On the Trinity; On Christ; On Salvation; On the Holy Spirit; On the Church; and On the Last Things. The statement on the Holy Spirit is especially significant for this study. It reads:

On the Holy Spirit: We believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of holiness. The Holy Spirit illuminates a person causing him to know sin and repent, to know the truth and to believe in Christ and so experience being born again unto salvation. He leads the believers into the truth, helps them to understand the truth and obey Christ, thereby bearing abundant fruit of life. The Holy Spirit gives all kinds of power and manifests the mighty acts of God through signs and miracles. The Holy Spirit searches all things. In Christ God grants a diversity of gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church so as to manifest the glory of Christ. Through faith and thirsting, Christians can experience the outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit. We do not believe in the cessation of signs and miracles or the termination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit after the apostolic period. We do not forbid speaking in tongues and we do not impose on people to speak in tongues; nor do we insist that speaking in tongues is the evidence of being saved.

We refute the view that the Holy Spirit is not a person of the Trinity but only a kind of influence.<sup>22</sup>

This statement contains several significant declarations that highlight the Pentecostal leanings of its framers. First, the notion that charismatic gifts were given only for the apostolic period (cessationism) is explicitly denied: “We do not believe in the cessation of signs and miracles or the termination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit after the apostolic period.”

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<sup>22</sup> See Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 62 for this English translation. I have included the sentence, “In Christ God grants a diversity of gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church so as to manifest the glory of Christ,” which is found in the Chinese original, but which is omitted in Lambert's version. This appears to be an editorial oversight.



Thus, it is not surprising that the statement also declares that the Holy Spirit “gives all kinds of power and manifests the mighty acts of God through signs and miracles.” This statement, at the very least then, identifies the framers and the house church groups they represent as charismatic.

But there is more. This statement contains another significant declaration: “Through faith and thirsting, Christians can experience the outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit.” Since this “outpouring and filling” may be received by Christians, this phrase must refer to a work of the Spirit subsequent to (at least logically, if not temporally) the regenerating work of the Spirit experienced at conversion. Although the purpose or impact of this gift is not explicitly stated, it is interesting to note that the language used to describe the experience (i.e., “outpouring and filling”) is drawn from the Book of Acts.<sup>23</sup> It seems obvious that a strengthening or empowering of the believer by the Spirit in accordance with the experience of the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts is in view here. The only prerequisites for receiving this gift which are listed in the statement are “faith” and “thirsting.” Surely this is another way of saying that this gift is available to all earnest believers who desire it. This statement then speaks of an empowering by the Spirit that is distinct from conversion and available to every believer. It thus identifies the framers as not only charismatic, but Pentecostal as well.

Finally, let us examine the reference to tongues: “We do not forbid speaking in tongues and we do not impose on people to speak in tongues; nor do we insist that speaking in tongues is the evidence of being saved.” Tony Lambert, noting this passage, states: “the careful neutrality concerning speaking in tongues is very far from the extreme teachings current in some charismatic or Pentecostal circles.”<sup>24</sup> It is not entirely clear what Lambert has in mind when he alludes to “extreme teachings current in some charismatic or Pentecostal circles.” Is he talking about the belief held by classical Pentecostals around the world that speaking in tongues is the sign or initial evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit? If so, Lambert not only states that this doctrine is “extreme,” he also implies that this house church statement rejects this doctrine. I would suggest, however, that this ‘reading’ of the statement tells us more about the

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<sup>23</sup> The Chinese characters translated “outpouring” (*jiao guan*) and “filling” (*chong man*) of the Spirit in this statement are also found in Acts 2:17 (“pour out”) and Acts 2:4 (“filled”) of the *He He Ben* translation, the standard and most widely used Chinese translation of the Bible.

<sup>24</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 64.

interpreter's presuppositions than it does about the intent of the original framers. The phrase, "we do not impose on people to speak in tongues" probably should be taken in light of what follows to mean that they do not force believers to speak in tongues by means of emotional or psychological coercion (e.g., by declaring tongues to be a sign that they are truly believers).<sup>25</sup> It is highly unlikely that the framers, with this phrase, were consciously renouncing the initial evidence doctrine of classical Pentecostalism. This seems to be an obvious conclusion in view of the fact that one of the four cardinal framers is the head of a classical Pentecostal group, the China for Christ Network.

The only doctrine that the statement specifically rejects and which is relatively common in evangelical circles in the West is the doctrine that denies the current validity of speaking in tongues. The statement is very clear: "We do not forbid speaking in tongues." The statement, of course, also rejects the strange and rare notion that tongue-speech is a sign of salvation. It is possible that this indeed is what Lambert has in mind when he speaks of "extreme teachings," but it is such a rare and unusual doctrine, certainly not representative of mainstream charismatic or Pentecostal Christianity, that one can only wonder.<sup>26</sup>

In short, the statement on tongues does not appear to be a rejection of the classical Pentecostal position. However, it does not affirm this position either. It reads like a very diplomatic attempt to steer a middle path between two extremes. It rejects the position of those who would seek to forbid tongues and it refutes those who would seek to use manipulative means to force believers to speak in tongues. In fact, the careful way in which this statement is framed suggests that it is a wise compromise which accommodates both classical Pentecostals on the one hand and charismatics and (non-classical) Pentecostals on the other.

We are now in a position to highlight the implications which the house church statement of faith has for the question at hand. Our analysis has revealed that this statement is indeed significant. With its carefully worded phraseology concerning the work of the Holy Spirit, the

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<sup>25</sup> The Chinese characters translated by the phrase, "do not impose upon" (*mian qiang*) certainly convey the notion of "force." There is perhaps a slight difference in the nuances of the English terms "impose" and "force", with force representing a slightly stronger term. The semantic range of the Chinese term, *mian qiang*, would certainly include the stronger connotations of "force."

<sup>26</sup> Only a few "Jesus only" groups, such as the United Pentecostal Church, would affirm this doctrine. These are fringe groups very much out of sync with mainstream charismatic or Pentecostal groups.

statement of faith suggests that its framers and the churches they represent are, at the very least, Pentecostal and perhaps even classical Pentecostal in their theological orientation.

### 3.7 Summary

I have surveyed what are generally recognized to be the five largest house church groups in China. Collectively these groups almost certainly represent a significant majority of the house churches in China,<sup>27</sup> and possibly a majority of the Christian population in China as a whole. In any event, these groups represent a significant cross-section of the Church in China. More specifically, I have analyzed the theological orientation of these groups, particularly as it relates to Pentecostal and charismatic issues. My evaluation has been based on my own personal conversations, the findings of fellow researchers, and selected written documents. Although my conclusions must be viewed as somewhat tentative since hard sociological data in the form of grass-roots surveys are lacking, these conclusions are based on what would appear to be the most extensive research on this issue available to date.

My research suggests that the five groups should be categorized as follows:

- China for Christ: largely classical Pentecostal, partly Pentecostal
- China Gospel Fellowship: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Yin Shang Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Li Xin Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Word of Life Church: largely non-charismatic, partly charismatic

Based on this analysis, I would conclude that the overwhelming majority of the Christians in China today are at least charismatic. This study suggests that 90% of house church Christians and perhaps 80% of

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<sup>27</sup> This conclusion was affirmed by A, B, C, and D. Of course there are other large, significant groups that are non-charismatic, such as the Wen Zhou Church and the Little Flock. (I might note that I have spoken to one of the leaders of the Little Flock and he indicated that he has had a Pentecostal experience which included speaking in tongues. This experience and his contact with China for Christ leaders has encouraged him to relate more constructively to other to this and other church groups.) However, there are also other large, significant groups which are Pentecostal as well. One such classical Pentecostal group which C relates to is 400,000 strong.

the total Christian population in China would affirm that the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Cor. 12:8-10 are available to the church today.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, in the light of the significant strength of the Pentecostal groups listed above, it is reasonable to conclude that a significant majority of the Christians in China today are not only charismatic, but also Pentecostal in their theological orientation. I would estimate that 75% of house church Christians and 60% of the total Christians population in China are accurately be described by this designation.

It is also clear that classical Pentecostals represent a minority of the believers in China, but it is a significant minority nonetheless. This is evident from that the fact that what appears to be the largest house church network in China today is best described as classical Pentecostal. I would suggest that approximately 25% of house church Christians and 20% of the total Christian population in China are classical Pentecostal.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to these conclusions concerning doctrine or beliefs, some general observations may also be made concerning behavior. The praxis

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<sup>28</sup> A word concerning the method used to arrive at these percentages is in order. I have taken the largest five house church groups as representative of house church Christians in China as a whole. I have used the estimated strength of these five churches listed in the methodology section above to arrive at specific percentages. Although these specific numbers may be high, the general proportions they represent are probably relatively accurate. Thus, the percentages for house church Christians were: non-charismatic (10%); charismatic (90%); Pentecostal (75%); and classical Pentecostal (25%). I have considered the China Gospel Fellowship and the two Anhui groups to be largely, but not entirely, Pentecostal. This accounts for the variance between the percentages for charismatics (90%) and Pentecostals (75%). As a result of my own personal observations and my reading of the research available, I have also assumed that in China house church Christians are three times as numerous as Christians affiliated with the TSPM churches. I then estimated, based on my own personal experience, concerning the percentage of TSPM Christians that might be classified as non-charismatic (50%), charismatic (50%), Pentecostal (20%), and classical Pentecostal (10%). This was the rationale, then, behind the final estimates. Note that in the percentages listed above, the numbers for charismatic, Pentecostal, and classical Pentecostal are presented in an overlapping way: classical Pentecostal is a subset of Pentecostal and both are subsets of the broader, inclusive term, "charismatic."

<sup>29</sup> These conclusions are generally consistent with the assessment of the other researchers consulted: A suggested at least 90% of house church Christians were, at the very least, charismatic; B affirmed that a significant majority were charismatic without stating any specific percentages; C and D also indicated that very large percentages were charismatic and Pentecostal.

of the House Church Movement in China may be described as exhibiting the following characteristics:<sup>30</sup>

- 1) A strong emphasis on personal experience, often reflected in emotionally-charged prayers and worship. God is understood to be present, personal, and vitally interested in communicating with and relating to individual believers. Exuberant, participatory worship and emotional responses to preaching are quite common and might be described as typical.
- 2) A strong expectation that God will intervene in miraculous ways in the daily lives of believers. House church Christians exhibit a firm belief in God's ability and willingness to work miracles in their midst. Their testimonies often refer to God healing the sick, raising the dead, granting special wisdom or direction, communicating through dreams, visions, or prophetic messages, providing boldness for witness, or granting miraculous strength and protection. This expectation is often expressed in an openness to the gifts of the Spirit and is certainly encouraged in part by such biblical passages as 1 Cor. 12:8-10.
- 3) A strong sense of their own weakness and dependence upon God. Perhaps due in part to their experiences of marginalization and persecution, house church believers often reflect a keen awareness of their own weakness and a strong sense of dependence upon God's supernatural power and leading. This is reflected in an emphasis on receiving strength and encouragement from the Holy Spirit, often in specific moments of prayer. This perspective is undoubtedly patterned after the experience of the early church recorded in the book of Acts. It is often associated with the expectation that one can receive needed strength or encouragement through a definable experience, regularly described as being "baptized in" or "filled with" the Holy Spirit.

#### 4. Gaining Perspective: A Contextual Assessment

The strong Pentecostal orientation of the Church in China is striking, but it should not surprise us. In fact, when the recent revival of Christianity in China is viewed against the backdrop of its historical, global, and sociological contexts, this is precisely what we would expect. Let us examine each of these contexts.

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<sup>30</sup> We have already noted the strong biblical focus of the house church movement and need not repeat it here.

#### 4.1 The Historical Context

One of the striking aspects of Christianity in pre-1949 China was the emergence of strong, vital indigenous churches. These churches were founded and led by Chinese Christians. They were established and operated entirely independent of foreign finances, control and leadership. Although these groups were largely overlooked by missionaries and have been neglected by historians, it is evident that these groups were extremely significant. More recently, Daniel Bays, a noted historian of Chinese Christianity, has highlighted the significance of these groups. Speaking of these independent Chinese Christian groups, Bays writes, "I believe that this sector [of the Christian Church] was far more interesting and significant than it might have been thought."<sup>31</sup> Bays estimates that by the 1940s these indigenous groups accounted for between 20-25% (or 200,000 believers) of all Protestants.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Bays notes that these groups have exerted a tremendous influence on the Christianity that has flourished in China since the 1980s:

Moreover, judging from what we know of the churches in China today, it is clear that a great many of the older Christians whose experience dates to before 1949 came out of these indigenous churches.<sup>33</sup>

The largest of these groups, the True Jesus Church, was and remains Pentecostal in character. Bays has established important links between the Azusa Street revival and the key founders of the True Jesus Church.

Alfred Garr, one of the first pastors at the Azusa Street revival to receive the baptism of the Spirit and speak in tongues, felt called to go as a missionary. He and his wife arrived in Hong Kong in October of 1907. The Garrs were joined by a small group of Pentecostals and they began to minister in Hong Kong. Garr's interpreter, Mok Lai Chi, received the baptism and the gift of tongues. Mok became the founding editor of a Chinese monthly paper, *Pentecostal Truths* (Wuxunjie zhenlibao), which was first issued in January of 1908. This paper "directly influenced the

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<sup>31</sup> Daniel H. Bays, "The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 307-16 (309).

<sup>32</sup> Bays, "Independent Christianity," p. 310; for similar estimates see Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 134 n. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Bays, "Independent Christianity," p. 310.

North China founders of the first major Chinese Pentecostal church, the True Jesus Church.”<sup>34</sup>

Another link between the Azusa Street revival and the True Jesus Church can be traced through a Mr. Bernsten, a missionary serving in China who was profoundly impacted by his experience at the altar of the Azusa Mission. After his experience at the Azusa Mission, Bernsten returned to China and, along with a small group of Pentecostals, opened an independent mission station in Zhending (just north of Shijiazhuang) of Hebei Province. In 1912 this group began to publish a newspaper, *Tongchuan fuyin zhenlibao* [Popular Gospel Truth]. This paper, along with the Hong Kong paper noted above, provided inspiration for the early founders of the True Jesus Church. Additionally, two of the key Chinese founders of the True Jesus Church, Zhang Lingshen and Wei Enbo were impacted in Beijing by members of the church Bernsten’s group had founded, *Xinxinhui* [the Faith Union].<sup>35</sup>

These two men (Zhang Lingshen and Wei Enbo), along with Barnabas Zhang, all of whom had Pentecostal experiences that included speaking in tongues, determined that they would form a Pentecostal church in China. They founded their first church in Tianjin in 1917. The church grew quickly and spread to Shandong, Hebei, Henan, Zhejiang, and other provinces. Its key areas of strength were in Hunan, Fujian, and Henan. Hunter and Chan note that the church’s “estimated membership was at least 120,000 by 1949” with 700 churches throughout China.<sup>36</sup>

Another large indigenous Chinese church which was also Pentecostal in nature was the Jesus Family. The Jesus Family was founded in the 1920s by Jing Dianyin in the village of Mazhuang (Taian County) in Shandong Province. The Jesus Family’s worship was marked by prayer for healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and other spiritual gifts. The Jesus Family also featured a communal way of life in which everything was shared. The Jesus Family was especially strong in the poorest parts of China. Hunter and Chan provide a wonderful description of the church from a present-day believer’s perspective: the church was “a love fellowship, a meeting-place for the weary and a place of comfort

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Bays, “Indigenous Protestant Churches in China, 1900-1937: A Pentecostal Case Study,” in *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, Steven Kaplan (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 124-43 (129).

<sup>35</sup> Bays, “Indigenous Protestant Churches,” p. 130. Bays also traces a link with a Pentecostal group associated with Pastor M. L. Ryan of Salem, Oregon, which established a Pentecostal center in Shanghai (pp. 130-31).

<sup>36</sup> Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 121.

for the broken-hearted...where you are, there is our home, and our home is everywhere.”<sup>37</sup> In its heyday in China the Jesus Family totaled over a hundred communities and around six thousand members.<sup>38</sup> The church still continues today in Taiwan.

The Spiritual Gifts Church (*Ling'en hui*) was a loosely knit independent church movement that emerged in the early 1930s. The movement centered in Shandong Province and was linked to the famous “Shandong Revival,” which impacted and divided a number of mainline churches and missions organizations. Bays notes that the Spiritual Gifts Church was composed of Chinese churches and pastors “who broke away from denominations or missions that refused to approve their controversial Pentecostal doctrines and practices.”<sup>39</sup> The church did not develop organizationally and it is difficult to ascertain its strength or influence.

There were, of course, other indigenous churches that were non-Pentecostal in character, such as The Little Flock (*Xiao qun*) established by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng) in the mid-1920s. And there were certainly a number of non-Pentecostal Chinese church leaders of stature. Wang Mingdao, for example, apparently had a Pentecostal experience in 1920, but later “backed away from full Pentecostalism.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that of the three largest independent Chinese churches that sprang up in the early part of the twentieth century (The True Jesus Church, The Little Flock, and the Jesus Family), two were Pentecostal. And one of these Pentecostal groups, the True Jesus Church, was by far the largest single indigenous Chinese church group of that era. This fact, coupled with the significant impact of the Pentecostal form of revivalism that swept through China in the 1930s, indicates that the majority of Chinese Christians prior to 1949, when able to develop their own Christian identity, gravitated to Pentecostal forms of worship and

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<sup>37</sup> Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 121; on the Jesus Family see also Bays, “Independent Christianity,” p. 312.

<sup>38</sup> Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 121; Bays, “Independent Christianity,” p. 312.

<sup>39</sup> Bays, “Independent Christianity,” pp. 312-13. See also Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Bays, “Christian Revival in China, 900-1937,” in *Modern Christian Revivals*, eds. Edith Blumhofer and Randall Balmer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 161-79 (171).



doctrine. It is worth noting, then, that indigenous Chinese Christianity was predominantly Pentecostal.<sup>41</sup>

Tony Lambert points out that today the Church in China is generally strong in those areas where historically the missionaries were most active; that is, in the eastern coastal provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu. However, Lambert goes on to note that the Chinese church is also very strong in some provinces where the missionaries were not as active, provinces like Henan and Anhui. He offers no rationale for the growth of the church in these regions, but does note that “the witness of independent, indigenous churches, such as the Little Flock and the Jesus Family, are also vital factors to be taken into account.”<sup>42</sup> What Lambert does not state, but what is especially striking is this: strong, indigenous Pentecostal churches were active in these regions prior to 1949 and today, strong, indigenous Pentecostal churches have blossomed in these same regions. It is difficult to deny that the legacy of these early indigenous churches lives on in the Christians and churches birthed in the revivals of the 1980s.<sup>43</sup> This legacy is conspicuously Pentecostal.

In the light of these historical facts, I would raise this question: If the majority of indigenous Chinese Christians prior to 1949 gravitated to Pentecostal forms of worship and doctrine, why would we expect it to be any different today? The lessons of history suggest that the predominantly Pentecostal character of the contemporary Chinese church should not surprise us.

#### 4.2 The Global Context

If we step back and look at the current revival of Christianity in China from the vantage point of contemporary trends in the global Christian community, again we see that our description of the Chinese church as predominantly Pentecostal is precisely what we should expect. Historians and researchers of Christianity all agree that one of the most significant religious phenomena of the past century (and many would say

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<sup>41</sup> Murray Rubinstein, “Holy Spirit Taiwan: Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in the Republic of China,” in *Christianity in China* (1996), pp. 353-66 (366) states that the “churches of the Holy Spirit” in Taiwan “have come the furthest toward creating a Christianity that is congruent with basic patterns of traditional Chinese religion” and feels they are on the “cutting edge of Christian progress.”

<sup>42</sup> Lambert, *Resurrection*, p. 154.

<sup>43</sup> See also Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 140.

the most significant) is the astounding growth of the modern Pentecostal movement.<sup>44</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Pentecostal movement did not exist. Today, there are over 200 million denominational Pentecostals and over 500 million charismatics and Pentecostals around the world.<sup>45</sup>

This movement, which ranks as the second largest family of Christians in the world (after the Roman Catholic Church), has experienced staggering growth, especially in the developing countries of the world.<sup>46</sup> Over 70% of charismatics and Pentecostals worldwide are non-white and 66% are located in the Third World.<sup>47</sup> Today, in continents like Latin America and Africa, a large majority of evangelical Christians are charismatic or Pentecostal. David Barrett estimates that there are now over 126 million charismatics and Pentecostals in Africa, and over 140 million in Latin America.<sup>48</sup> Charismatic and Pentecostal groups have also grown rapidly in Asia, where they now number over 134 million.<sup>49</sup> Barrett suggests that over 54 million charismatics, neo-charismatics, and Pentecostals (which he defines largely in ecclesiastical terms) now reside in China.<sup>50</sup> And, speaking of the Han Chinese worldwide, Barrett claims that by 1985 over 25% were tongues-speakers. Furthermore, he states that the proportion of all Han Chinese Christians who are “phenomenologically” Pentecostal or charismatic may be as high as 85%.<sup>51</sup>

Even if one remains skeptical regarding the precision of some of these statistics, the magnitude of the movement and the general nature of

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<sup>44</sup> Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 2 notes that “some historians refer to the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the ‘Pentecostal century.’” See the similar judgment issued by William and Robert Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Synan, *Century*, p. 2. The global statistics are conveniently chronicled in D. B. Barrett and T. M. Johnson, “Global Statistics,” *NIDPC*, pp. 284-302. See also Synan, *Century*, especially chapters 14 and 15.

<sup>46</sup> Synan, *Century*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Synan, *Century*, p. 383.

<sup>48</sup> See Barrett & Johnson, “Global Statistics,” p. 287.

<sup>49</sup> See Barrett & Johnson, “Global Statistics,” p. 287.

<sup>50</sup> See the *NIDPC*, p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> See Barrett & Johnson, “Global Statistics,” p. 287.

recent trends cannot be questioned. In view of these trends worldwide, particularly in the developing countries of continents like Africa and Latin America, we would expect that in China too charismatics and Pentecostals would represent a significant and even dominant force within the larger Christian community. This is certainly the case if Barrett's numbers are anywhere near correct. Although this study has attempted to provide more specific, theologically defined, categories for analysis, our conclusions are very much in line with these global trends in general and Barrett's assessment of China in particular.

#### 4.3 The Sociological Context

The reasons for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity worldwide are complex and one should resist the temptation to view these developments totally in terms of naturalistic explanations. Nevertheless, sociologists may provide insight into some of the factors which have encouraged this amazing growth. One of the most striking features of contemporary China is the startling pace of its modernization and economic development. Strange as it may sound, this process of modernization and development may represent a major factor in creating a context conducive for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity.

Ryan Dunch, in a very perceptive article, notes that modernization does impact the religious makeup of a nation. However, he suggests that rather than "producing a straightforward decline in religion," modernization tends to change its nature. More specifically, Dunch suggests that religion, as it meets modernization, tends to become more voluntary (rather than acquired at birth), individualized, and experiential. These shifts in turn force religious institutions to change accordingly. Dunch views the Pentecostal movement as especially well-suited to minister to the needs of people in societies, like that of China, which are shaped by industrial market economies:

Pentecostal movements, once routinely presented as reactions against modernity, are now being reevaluated as especially reflective of these forces, in their emphasis on the self, and in equipping their adherents, especially in the developing capitalist societies of Latin American and South Korea, with the "values of ascetic Protestantism...so essential for social mobility in a capitalist economy."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 215 (citing Andrew Walker, "Thoroughly Modern: Sociological Reflections on the Charismatic Movement from the End of

We have already noted that Pentecostal doctrine and praxis were particularly appealing to indigenous Chinese Christians in the 1920s and 30s. Certainly many Chinese were attracted to this new form of religion, “which preached good conduct, promised fellowship with divinity, afforded healing and exorcism and offered forms of worship that could be corporate or individual according to the circumstances.”<sup>53</sup> And, as Hunter and Chan recognize, “the religious revival of the 1980s suggests that these are still deep needs.”<sup>54</sup> It is not unreasonable to suggest, then, that the forces of modernization have, in part, enhanced this sense of need. All of this suggests that China, like other societies being shaped by modernization, represents fertile ground for the seeds of Pentecostal revival.

## 5. Conclusion

We are in a position to summarize our findings. I have analyzed the theological orientation of the five largest house church groups in China. My analysis was based on my own personal conversations, the findings of fellow researchers, and selected written documents. I have concluded that these five groups should be categorized as follows:

- China for Christ: largely classical Pentecostal, partly Pentecostal
- China Gospel Fellowship: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Yin Shang Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Li Xin Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Word of Life Church: largely non-charismatic, partly charismatic

These conclusions suggest that the overwhelming majority of the Christians in China today are at least charismatic, this would include 90% of house church Christians and perhaps 80% of the total Christian population in China. Furthermore, it is also apparent that a significant majority of the Christians in China today are not only charismatic, but also Pentecostal in their theological orientation. Approximately 75% of house church Christians and 60% of the total Christians population in

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the Twentieth Century,” in *Charismatic Christianity: Sociological Perspective*, p. 36).

<sup>53</sup> Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 140.

<sup>54</sup> Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 140.

China would fall into this category. Finally, while it is evident that classical Pentecostals represent a minority of the believers in China, it is a significant minority, encompassing approximately 25% of house church Christians and 20% of the total Christian population in China.

I have also suggested that these findings should not surprise us. Given the strong history of Pentecostalism within the Chinese indigenous churches prior to 1949 and the dramatic growth of Pentecostal churches around the world in recent years, particularly in developing countries, this is precisely what we would expect. I have also noted that Chinese society, which is to a significant degree shaped by the forces of modernization, appears to be particularly fertile soil for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity. Thus, historical patterns, global trends, and sociological factors all serve to strengthen our conclusions.

By way of conclusion, I might add that this description of the Chinese church is generally not acknowledged in evangelical publications. A case in point are the two generally excellent and well-researched volumes produced by Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (1994) and *China's Christian Millions* (1999). In these volumes Lambert consistently describes the Chinese church as evangelical, exhibiting a conservative theological, warm experiential piety, and an openness to the miraculous (especially healing).<sup>55</sup> However, the strong charismatic and Pentecostal orientation of the Chinese church, expressed in its doctrine and praxis, is consistently neglected. This neglect is evidenced in a variety of ways.

First, there is Lambert's curious description of the house church: "There is a strong wing who are charismatic or Pentecostal, but they are not in the majority."<sup>56</sup> Lambert makes this claim and yet he fails to define the crucial terms, charismatic and Pentecostal, or to offer any supporting evidence.

Secondly, Lambert rather consistently refers to charismatics and Pentecostals in a pejorative way. He links Chinese charismatics and Pentecostals with divisive extremists,<sup>57</sup> uncritically cites a very negative

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<sup>55</sup> On the evangelical nature of the Chinese church, see for example Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 282-83 and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 30-33, 68, and 188. Note also his positive assessment of miracles and healing in the Chinese church in Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 112-114 and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 117-20.

<sup>56</sup> Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 48.

assessment by a TSPM pastor of a prophetic utterance,<sup>58</sup> refers to the “hyped artificial atmosphere of ‘healing meetings’” in the West,<sup>59</sup> perhaps implies that the teaching of classical Pentecostals is “extreme”,<sup>60</sup> and speaks of some charismatic (and evangelical) churches in the West where “preaching is at a discount” and the focus has shifted away from the Bible to “the shifting sands of subjectivism and emotionalism.”<sup>61</sup>

Finally, Lambert generally refuses to refer to Chinese groups and individuals as charismatic or Pentecostal even when they clearly are. This is especially striking with respect to the indigenous Pentecostal groups which emerged in pre-1949 China, the True Jesus Church and The Jesus Family. Lambert discusses these groups in both of his books, but, with one exception, fails to mention that they are Pentecostal.<sup>62</sup> Lambert also cites two testimonies that almost certainly come from Pentecostals. The first testimony is cited as illustrating “the authentic spirit of spiritual revival” and offering “insight into the deeper evangelical spirituality of the house-churches.”<sup>63</sup> Any reference to the Pentecostal nature of this believer’s faith or church is conspicuously absent. The second testimony is so dramatically Pentecostal that Lambert feels compelled to comment: “Not all Christians in China would be as Pentecostal or charismatic as the writer of this letter...”<sup>64</sup> This testimony is reproduced in condensed form in *China’s Christian Millions*, but with all of the overtly Pentecostal content discretely edited out.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 111.

<sup>59</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 120.

<sup>60</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 64 and note our discussion of Lambert’s interpretation of the house church Statement of Faith above.

<sup>61</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 188.

<sup>62</sup> See Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 14, 154, 158, 246, 271; and *China’s Christian Millions*, pp. 49-55. The one exception is found in *China’s Christian Millions*, p. 49, where Lambert indicates that one of the founders of the True Jesus Church, Paul Wei, was “inspired by the Pentecostal movement.” He also mentions various practices of the church, including speaking in tongues. Lambert goes on to discuss the Jesus Family at length (pp. 50-52) without a single reference to their Pentecostal roots or orientation.

<sup>63</sup> For the testimony see Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 159-62; the first quote is from p. 159, the second from p. 162.

<sup>64</sup> For this testimony see Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 163-67; the quote is from p. 168.

<sup>65</sup> See Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, pp. 171-72.

My purpose here is not to denigrate what are by all accounts two well-researched, highly readable, and extremely valuable books about the Church in China. I simply want to suggest that many evangelical researchers appear loathe to acknowledge the dramatically charismatic and Pentecostal character of the Chinese church. I do believe that this is an omission that needs to be rectified. This is particularly the case since the most capable and prolific researchers writing on the Chinese church for western Christians are evangelicals with apparently non-charismatic leanings, such as Tony Lambert. I trust my comments will be understood in the larger context of my great appreciation for these men, their gifts, their dedication, and their writings.

So, it would appear that a clearer, more objective assessment of the theology and practice of the Chinese church, at least when it comes to charismatic and Pentecostal issues, is needed. I hope this essay represents a small step in that direction. We all are inclined to see only what we want to see. This was certainly the case with many of the missionaries who were contemporaries of those first indigenous Chinese Christians. As Hunter and Chan, speaking of this largely Pentecostal revivalist movement, note:

The missionaries perhaps failed to appreciate the significance of these expressions of popular religiosity, which they compared unfavourably to the quieter and more orderly forms of worship they advocated themselves. As we look back from the 1990s they seem a quite natural form of religious behaviour among peasant communities and recent immigrants to cities.<sup>66</sup>

I do hope that our generation will not make the same mistake. I trust that we will acknowledge and respect the significance of this powerful, indigenous, and largely Pentecostal form of Christianity that has emerged in China over the past two decades.

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<sup>66</sup> Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 135.