

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 6

Volume 6 • Number 1 • April 1982

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews selected from publications
worldwide for an international readership,
interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary
living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

points". This document, which has been given wide publicity, speaks to the structures and functions of the Church in China today. For a more theological interpretation of the situation we turn to Shen Yifan, pastor of the International Community Church in Shanghai, who presented a paper entitled "How New China Helped Christians Think Anew Theologically" at an international conference on contextualisation in China held in Montreal, Canada, October 2nd–10th, 1980. Shen Yifan maintains that through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Christians in China have gained new theological insights. According to Jonathan Chao,¹ Shen Yifan lists four. The first insight is a deeper application of the doctrine of incarnation. "The existence and development of the church depends on her identification with the people around her, on her identification with the people of her own society, nation and country". The second insight is that Christians testify to the grace of God when they manifest their love both to God and man. The third insight is the new awareness of the resurrection of Christ, the cosmic Christ who transcends the world and history and yet is within the world and history. Shen's fourth insight is in the area of eschatology in which he says, "Christ who comes again is not to negate and destroy all the human achievements in history, but to accept and perfect them as gifts before the throne of God". Shen adds that the Chinese church is seeking to "weave a self-hood of her own so that in the fulness of time she may dedicate the glory and honour of the Chinese nation to the New Jerusalem, and offer them to Christ as the proper contribution of the Chinese Christians to the new heaven and the new earth". Jonathan Chao observes that Shen Yifan's thinking forms a continuum with the earlier Chinese indigenous church thinking of the 1920's.

There is little information available on what those leaders of the home groups who do not identify with the Three-Self Movement are saying. Their silence must not be interpreted to mean that they have no opinions on the issue raised by the Three-Self Church leaders. p.64 Their primary concerns seem to be evangelism and the pastoral care of their groups.

Arthur F. Glasser, a former missionary to China in an editorial on 'China Today—An Evangelical Perspective'² outlines what many non-conciliar evangelicals are thinking about China today. In it he reminds those who have short memories of the theological views held by some vocal theologians and missiologists during the past thirty years. He calls for a more balanced reporting on those who speak for the Church in China.

ERT invites further responses to this important issue.

(Editor) p. 65

People's Thought in China An Initial Study

Milton Wan

¹ TSPM Speaks in Montreal, *China and the Church Today*, 3.6.1981.

² Missiology: an International Review Vol. 1X, No. 3, July 1981, pp.261–276

Reprinted from Zhongguo yu Jiaohui, Nov.–Dec. 1980. (Translated by Tan Teng Tiong and printed in China and the Church Today, 3:5, 1981) with permission

As Christians who are concerned about evangelistic work in China, we must also be concerned about the thought patterns of the mainland Chinese today. It is only through understanding their aspirations, their feelings, and their needs that the gospel can be spread effectively.

At the same time, in discussing people's thought in China today, two difficulties immediately come to mind. First, the land of China is so vast, from north to south, from cities to villages, that to find a common denominator linking the lifestyles of the people would be presumptuous. Second, mainland China today is still apparently in a transition period of its cultural thought patterns. The traditional culture of thousands of years is still entrenched in every level of life; but thirty years of communism is creating a new value system and new lifestyles.

Therefore, the writer would not claim to be able to encompass the complete mental outlook of the Chinese people today. But of the many factors shaping people's thought in China today, the most obvious and direct is politics. In mainland China, no level of lifestyle can be separated from politics. And from the Cultural Revolution, through the "Gang of Four," to the "Four Modernizations," every change in political emphasis has directly affected the fate and lives of the people and shaped their thought patterns. Using this hypothesis as a starting point, this article tries to investigate the changing political climates of the past decade.

We divide the people's mental outlooks into three major trends: alienation, materialism and nihilism. These directions have emerged respectively from the ideological dictatorship of the Gang of Four (1969–1976), the political thought during the present Four Modernizations era, and the switch from one to the other.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF THE GANG OF FOUR AND ALIENATION

The main characteristic of the Gang of Four era was full-scale political dictatorship on all levels—every citizen was required to be **P. 66** politically "conscious" and to engage in "struggle." But the fact is that after the storm and unrest of the Cultural Revolution (1966–69), a large majority of the people in China were tired of politics and feared struggle. The conflict of the outer demands and their inner feelings created a strong alienation between people's personal feelings and their public lives. Even though many people's inner feelings about politics had deadened, they were still required to show political consciousness in frequent public meetings.

This double life existed even within families—during the Cultural Revolution parents and children, and husbands and wives had to engage in mutual criticism and struggle in order to "define" and "reform" their political inclinations. And because of those unforgettable experiences and lessons, there still exists a certain amount of alienation and pretension between the two generations in Chinese families.

Generally, Chinese people are warm and frank, but there are now certain forbidden areas which one never mentions to others, even to close friend or relatives. This developed from the indescribable experiences of the Cultural Revolution.

During the Gang of Four era, everyone was supposed to say and do what was demanded of them by the party. The conflict of this type of character acting with one's inner feelings is termed "the disorder of self." It is a deep-rooted alienation from one's self.

If we view sin as alienation, then sin can be alienation between God and man, man and man, man and nature, and even man and himself. Hence, since the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four eras, the mainland Chinese today should have a deeper understanding of the evilness of sin and mankind. The traditional Chinese confidence in an innate goodness of man, which was a great obstacle to the gospel, has been seriously damaged.

THE FOUR MODERNIZATIONS AND MATERIALISM

Since the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, the Chinese Communists have made a complete turn around in their official political thought. While the Gang of Four emphasized political consciousness as a key to social transformation, the present regime is focusing on economic development under the Four Modernisations. This program has shaped the government's education policy and propaganda for some four years. These have had an enormous influence on the lifestyle of the people.

Since 1977, this propaganda has followed a "logical" approach: p. 67 "The need to modernize means we must emphasize science and technology; to emphasize science and technology means we must uphold the omnipotence of science, that the only 'truth' is what can be scientifically proven; to uphold this 'scientism' means we must adopt a materialist outlook and theory of evolution to explain the universe and life."

Therefore, the government's youth education policy is that "to modernize there must be a firm belief in materialism and evolution." In new books and journals, it is always made clear that not to believe in materialism is to be against modernization. Whether we agree or not, the Chinese Communists are moving positively to achieve this goal in their youth education policy.

On the personal scale, due to the collapse of the "politics is all" attitude of the Gang of Four, there has been a relaxation in control over the people's thought in the past few years. But this has also led to a general decline in the Maoist morality of "serving the people," and a rise of individualist attitudes. This change in outlook was behind the '78-'79 Democracy Wall posters and the Democratic Movement, in which young intellectuals promoted human rights and antisocialist ideas.

Among the ordinary people, selfish attitudes have appeared; the spirit of "for the nation, for the people" was transformed into one of pursuing personal benefits. This was encouraged for them by the expansion of limited free-market and private enterprise. Many Chinese people have become openly envious of the western way of life. Some cannot find satisfaction, and desire to emigrate, legally or illegally, to Hong Kong, Europe, or America.

In truth, we know there are loopholes in the "logical" approach: to modernize certainly means that science is needed; but a modernized nation also needs human rights, freedom and democracy. To recognize the importance of science and technology, does not necessarily mean to believe in scientism. Through science one can more clearly see the beauty, harmony and greatness of the universe, which causes people to give praise and worship to its Creator. We hope that the Chinese students now studying in the West will meet scientists who are faithful Christians, and bring back a different and new attitude and influence on this matter.

POLITICAL CHANGE AND NIHILISM

There were recognisable influences on the people's outlook during the Gang of Four Modernisation era. But perhaps the strongest factor P. 68 has been changeability. Political changes created a loss of direction in the people; today's hero may be a great scoundrel

tomorrow. And what is criticised today may be praised beyond measure tomorrow! Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Today's enthusiasm can be tomorrow's evil doings. Such political and value changes only brought a loss of sense of security and ideals: tomorrow became a permanently shadowy unknown. This effect was true for local cadres, educated youth, and all citizens alike.

The many experiences of local cadres—Communist Party and government workers—in the storms of political change made them crafty and experienced. They came to believe that “it is better to have one less affair than one more.” They would not work too hard or be too enthusiastic—in everything they became reserved. They deemed this apathy a relatively safe and secure political life. Some, knowing the insecurity of the future, strove to gain position and authority today, to have some self-protection and material gain while they could. This approach created a serious problem of corruption among the cadres, still a big problem in Chinese politics today.

Yet some educated youths have not abandoned communist ideology and its utopian ideals of the future. That they have not totally given up on Marxism is shown by some of their underground journals. But they profess deep disappointment in, and suspicions about, the party's performance over the past decade. Their attitude has been to trust in Marxist ideas, but be skeptical about the absolute power of the party. They are searching for a new absolute in classic Marxism, a system without one party dictatorship or individual hero worship. These young people may seem immature, but they may be able to lead China away from Mao's strict communism.

For the Chinese, the painfulness of recalling the past and the loss of confidence in the future means that they can only live for today. Therefore a desire for immediate sensual and materialist pleasure has become widespread in China. At the same time, the uncertainty of the future has brought a revival of traditional Chinese superstitions especially in the rural villages.

CONCLUSION

To what degree and in what directions have the worldviews of the people in China really changed over the last thirty years? It may be that the changes summarized in this article could pass quickly from their minds. For underneath the immediate tensions, the Chinese mentality remains today much as it has been for thousands of years, [P. 69](#) in the world's longest cultural tradition. As Christians, let us pray that during this time of change in China, there may indeed be a lasting change—a change according to the truth of scripture.

Milton Wan, a former research associate of the Chinese Church Research Center, Hong Kong, is now completing his D. Phil. at Oxford University, England. [p. 70](#)

China Today—An Evangelical Perspective

Arthur F. Glasser