

# **Christianity Transmission History and Contemporary Situation in China**

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**Abstract:** *The Christianity is transmitted with faster speed than ever in recent years in China. The Christianity transmission in China has long history and many setbacks, especially in modern history of China. The missionaries tried different ways to propagate such religion and had little achievement, even such transmission incurred the slaughter. But after the reforming and opening policy, the Christianity is accepted more easily in China. The main form of the Christianity church is the house church, and the believers in the countryside accounts for the most part of the whole believers. There is increasing interest in the house church and Christianity in countryside, and those are also the key to understand the Christianity transmission in contemporary China.*

**Keywords:** *Christianity; transmission; church house; rural areas; Boxer Rebellion.*

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## **I. Introduction**

In the end of 19th century, the American missionary Arthur Henderson Smith published his Chinese Characteristics and believed that the spread of Christianity in Chinese countryside would bring about a series of positive changes in Chinese countryside. After 100 years, the spread of Christianity were fast and very popular. In the population of the Chinese Christians, 80% are in the Chinese countryside. The most common form of the church is the house church, which is not registered in the government so that the government can not supervise it effectively.

Why such house church are the most common church form in China? How is the Christianity transmitted in the countryside and what is the result of that? Such problems are interesting, because such problems would enhance the understanding of Chinese Christianity.

## **II. Literature Review**

There are many papers about the Christianity in China. If one searches in the CNKI with the key word "Christianity in China", one would find 3124 papers about the research topic. The research topic can be divided into many aspects, such as the Christianity in ancient China, the Christianity in modern China, the Christianity in contemporary China, the spread forms of Christianity in China etc. The spread form of the Christianity in China is related with my research topic. The following includes some representative papers about the Christianity spread in China.

Many researchers try to study the media forms of spread of the Christianity in China. The Internet influences many aspects of the society, so Christianity propagation also uses the internet. Different with the Christianity transmission in ancient China, the Christianity tries to spread the Christianity in the web portals, blogs, virtual community and social network etc. The Christianity makes good use of the internet, and the religious content in the internet has become very important. (Zuo, P. & Li, Y. 2012) The Buddhism, Islam and Christianity were transmitted to China through the peaceful commercial activity, and all have the process of secularization. Compared to the two other religions, the spread of Christianity is faster. (Luo, Y. 2005) .

The spread of Christianity in ancient China is another important research topic. The Christianity spread speed was slow, because the Christianity was transmitted into China with the invasion of the western countries in recent history. The beliefs of the Christianity and the traditional culture were different, and that formed another reason for why the Christianity spread speed was slow in ancient China. (Li, Y. 2004)

The result of the spread of Christianity in China is also widely discussed by some researchers. The spread of Christianity in China brought about the positive influence, such as it introduced the western technology to China and the Chinese culture to the western world. But it also had some negative influence such as it provided some information for the invasion troops, disrupted the process of democracy and suppressed the revolutionary activities that was beneficial to Chinese development. (Cao, Z. 2003)

The Christianity in Chinese countryside is an important research topic. The Christianity spread in the countryside of China has been discussed by some scholars, and that is also a remarkable problem that needs to be investigated. In the process of the Christianity spread in China, there are two forms: need-supplying form and socialization spread form. With the completion of the religion development and the public service system, the

needing-supplying form would be less important than the socialization spread form. (Han, H.2005)

Xie Ming's doctoral dissertation *The Christianity Spread Form in Modern China* discussed the Christianity spread form in China. In the dissertation, he discussed the history and current status of the Christianity, the way and form of the Christianity spread, the current status of the Christianity in the countryside of China, the Christianity in the undergraduate students, the relation between the mass media and the Christianity spread. The author believes that the Christianity spread in China brought about many secret worries about the national safety, although it is an significant spectacle in modern China. In history, the spread of the Christianity faced with many obstacles spoke volumes for the strength and cohesive force of Chinese traditional culture. The wide spread of Christianity in China has intimate relationship with the disruption of the Chinese traditional culture. In contemporary times, the spread of Christianity in China is in disordered state in some aspects, for example, some propagators misunderstand the Doxies of Christianity obviously to cater the need of the receivers; Some unobvious and numerous churches exist, so the number of Christianity is far more than the number of the official statistics. (Xie, M. 2010) In *The Christianity Spread Form in Modern China*, the forms and situation of the Christianity are also discussed in details.

In order to discuss the Christianity spread in Chinese countryside, we should retrospect the history of the Christianity in ancient and modern China. Then the spread forms of the Christianity in contemporary China can be discussed. In the foundation of the analysis and discuss, the Christianity spread in countryside of China can be discussed.

### **III. The History of Christianity in Ancient and Modern China**

In Tang Dynasty of China, the Christianity is transmitted into China. In the beginning, the government of Tang Dynasty was tolerant to the missionaries and Christianity, but later they repelled the Christianity. From the end of the Tang Dynasty to the Five Kingdoms and the Bei Song Dynasty, the Christianity in the mainland of China almost vanished, but in the north-west China, the Christianity was relatively active. Between the 13th and 14th century, which was the Yuan Dynasty, the Christianity developed well. After the Yuan Dynasty, the Christianity disappeared again. In 16th century, the Catholicism was transmitted into China accompanied with the western colonialism. In 1582, the famous missionary Matteo Ricci arrived at China. He combined the thoughts of the Catholicism and Confucian in the following years, which laid the foundation for the spread of the Christianity in China.

In Qing Dynasty, especially in the period between 1692 and the 1707, the Catholicism blossomed in China, with more than 300 thousand believers. In the end, the emperor ordered the Catholics should be repelled from China. But after that, the Catholicism spread in China secretly. After the Opium War, the Qing Government was forced to resign some unequal treatise. The Catholicism developed fast in that period, and some missionaries were believed as colluded with the invasion of the imperialism.

In the above analysis of the spread of Christianity in China, one can finds that the spread was involved in the political activity of the governors and invasion. The policy of the governments is the key factor to influence the spread of the Christianity.

### **IV. The Form of the Christianity Spread in Modern China**

Before 1949, the spread of Christianity in China has two spheres as the upper class and lower class. In the upper class, the missionaries propagated the Christianity through translating the academic works, establishing schools and introducing the technology of the western, because they believed the upper class were well educated and would be interested in knowledge. They wanted to propagate the Christianity through the spread of knowledge. But the upper class did not pay attention to the Christianity but the knowledge of the western.

The typical missionary of such kind was Timothy Richard, who was British and arrived at China in 1870. He preached the Christianity in Shandong, contacting with both the upper class and the lower class. In the activities of the relieving the people in the disasters, he drew many believers, who were mainly of the lower class. The dignitary officer Li Hongzhang told him: "Your followers is nothing but the ones who want to get the life necessities from the church. Once the church lacks the money to supply them, they will dismiss. I know there is no true intellectual in the Christianity believers." (Xiong, Y. 1994) Timothy Richard tried to propagate the Christianity in the upper class from then on. The mainly ways of him were to found the press, which could transmit the knowledge in the upper class, and to introduce the western science by establishing the publishing house. He combined the thoughts of Confucian and Christianity to influence the intellectuals of China. Some technology of the western world also was transmitted to China through his elaboration. His work introduced some academic thoughts and technology of the western to China, but the Christianity was ignored by the intellectuals.

In the lower class, the missionaries respected Chinese traditional culture and the feeling of Chinese people. They dressed in Chinese clothes and ate Chinese food to comply with Chinese custom. The missionaries

preached in the street, but they could not make the crowd believe the Christianity, although their activities inspired the wonders of the crowd. Their work was full with the frustration feeling, for example, the leaflets they distributed in the street were used as the packages for food and medicine.

The Chinese medicine was ineffective sometimes in that period, so the western medicine was welcomed by Chinese people. In order to attract the people of China, the missionaries would practice the medicine for the lower class. For many people of the lower class, the money was little so they could not get their illness cured. Although some missionaries were not the doctors, they would take some western medicine with themselves for the trust of the lower class people. The earliest missionary making use of the western medicine was Robert Morrison, who established a Chinese medicine hospital for Chinese people in Macau. In 1833, another hospital was established by him. During the period, the Christianity was spread effectively. In 1835, American missionary Paker established the first western medicine hospital in China, and propagated the Christianity. For Chinese people, especially the lower class people, the medicine and hospital were the most necessary matter and related with the living or not. So hospitals and medicine, especially the western medicine, played an important role in the propagation of Christianity.

Another form of the Christianity transmission was through the establishing of school. Many of the schools had the function of propagating the Christianity and spreading the knowledge of technology. In course of lawsuit, the Christianity church would interfere with the cases of the believers in order to make the believers have the privilege. That was also a way to propagate the Christianity.

The lower class people would follow the Christianity firmly, which was on contrast to the condition in the upper class people. The upper class people would be very interested in the knowledge and technology of the western world, but they showed little interest in the Christianity.

Before 1949, the Christianity had more than 4000 thousands of Catholicism and Christianity believers. (Zhang, M. 2013) The Christianity spread difficultly. At that time, China had the consciousness of being the best country of the world. So the Chinese would not accept any thought system except the Confucian. People of China would not accept the transmission of the Christianity, which meant the superstition for the traditional Confucian thought. The Christianity believed the idolatry was not right, but the opinion was contrary to the action of the Confucian.

In ancient China, there was a very important class in the counties, the squires. Although the squires were not the local officers, they would administer the local affairs in detail, so the benefits were combined with the countryside closely. They were the intellectuals who had certain educational degree, and were the agents of the feudal order and power in the countryside. The church grew up in the late-Qing Dynasty and played an important role in the countryside, but that meant the benefits and the expecting order of the squires were violated, so the squires began to oppose the church and the missionary.

The local officers were also against the preach activities, since the church and the missionary violated the benefits and the order of the countryside. For example, the church would be involved in the lawsuits and on the side of the believers. That disrupted the normal lawsuits of the countryside. The preaching activities also violated the custom of the ancient China. For example, in the church, the male and female were seated together. In China at that time, the action was not moral. So for the grassroots, the Christianity was not right.

In the analysis of above, we would find that the Christianity had no the suitable environment. The traditional thought system of China, the local officers and the squires, the grassroots were all against the Christianity. So the rumors about Christianity were spread. Someone said there were group fornications in the church. In fact, the imagination was incurred by the condition that the male and female were seated together. There also some rumors about the babies that the church adopted. There were many deserted babies in that time, so the church established some charity organizations to adopt the babies. The condition of the organizations was not good or the babies had serious diseases and bad constitutions, so the adopted babies would die easily. Someone said the church bought or stole the babies to take off their eyes for making gold, the hearts for making medicine.

The so-called believers had different motivations to join in the church. Some of them were only for the necessities of lives or survival. They did not have the real thought of seeking for God and the real beliefs. The western missionaries also had the different motivations. Those made the situation even more difficult for the preaching activities.

At last, the Boxer Rebellion outburst. In the rebellion, the church, missionaries and believers were hit hard. Many churches were destroyed, with the missionaries and believers slaughtered. According to the catholic Li Damu's Recording of the Boxer Disaster and the British missionary Donald Macgillivray's works, in the rebellion, the missionaries and believers being killed were more than 2, 3000. (Yu, Z. 2005) The impulse against the Christianity in the different classes of China released in the rebellion, and the Christianity paid much price. The attacking against the Christianity was most violent in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei province, where were in the northern China.

## **V. The Christianity Spread After 1949**

After 1949, when the P. R. of China was established, the believers of Christianity increased in the whole. The government-approved Christian body is the Three Self Church in contemporary China. China Three Self Christianity patriotic movement committee and the China Christianity associate have the following view on the wide spread of the Christianity in China: "China christianity has changed the feature of overseas and established its owner church administered by itself in the elaboration of China Three Self Christianity patriotic movement committee local Three Self Christianity patriotic movement committee and the believers all over China in the last 30 years. The patriotic and socialism consciousness of Chinese Christianity believers is also improved much. Because the reasons above, more and more people are willing to come near to Christianity, understand Christianity and accept Christianity. So our church will be prosperous." (Shen, D. 1984) The Three Self church plays an important role in the spread of China Christianity spread.

In recent years, the believers of Christianity in China increased faster. One reason is that the reform and openness policy makes China communicate with the western more no matter socially or economically. More and more Chinese people meet with the Christianity and are influenced by it. Another reason is that the disruption caused by the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution denied and destroyed many traditional culture of China, so after the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese people found themselves were in the vacuum of belief. The reform and openness policy made them receive many western cultures and religions. China was influenced by the Europe and north America mainly after the reform and openness, and many Chinese people absorbed the western knowledge hungrily. The Christianity influenced them explicitly or implicitly. Besides, the environment is not hostile to the Christianity as before, and more people can understand the believers although they are not the believers.

## **VI. The Three Self Church And House Church**

Although the Three Self church draws many Chinese people and plays an important role in the transmission of the Christianity, there are still many house churches. The house church is not approved by the government explicitly, so the house church is in a unclear situation.

American religion socialist Yang Fenggang put forward the theory of three colors in Chinese religion. He divide the Chinese churches into red, gray and black. The three self church registered in the government is the red church, and the heresy belongs to the black church. But in China, there are more gray churches, which are the house churches. The house church is not registered in the government and has violent competition with each other. Yang Fenglan believes that as long as the government restricts the religious organizations, the black church will appear. The number of the red church is restricted and the black church is repressed, then the gray church will act. The more religion restriction, the more gray churches. (Yang, F. 2006) "Facing the growing black and gray church, Chinese government should adjust the religion policy to continue the supervision on the religion market and to ensure the harmonious coexistence of the development of the religion market and the construction of the socialism modernization, and to avoid the religion market becomes the hindrance of the social development." (Xie, M.2010)

House church develops with very fast speed in recent years. For example, the house church in Guangzhou distributes in the urban areas mainly. Compared to the southern rural areas, the urban areas are influenced by the traditional culture less. Besides, there are more floating population in urban area, so the urban areas are more inclusive and open, then the house church general appear in Guangzhou urban areas. Because of the floating population characteristic of Guangzhou population, the participants of the house church are often personal but not in the form of the family unit.

In 1980s and 1990s, when the house church first appeared in China, the government would arrest, detain and hold inquests on the heads of the house church. In the present, the government is not as before to intervene in the affairs of the house church. The more open and inclusive society of Guangzhou make the house church get more smoothly development. However, the house church is still wandering between the legal and illegal.

The problems of the house church have been addressed by some scholars. Li Xiaohu believes the house church has many defects. First, it has no legal status and are not the social organization with legal personality. Second, the house church can not be registered as the civil society group, so it can not get public donations and enjoy the national treatment. Second, the house church is not public, so it would prone to bias in the development. Some people would seek personal gains in the name of beliefs in the house church. It would even go to the heresy road. In addition, due to the imperfection of the law and regulations, the house church will make some problems more complicated in China. (Li, X. 2012) Yu Jianrong thinks that China government attaches great importance to the Christianity and emphasizes whether it is legal. The administration causes some depression on the development of Christianity in fact, then the house church appears. The house church becomes the importance difference between the developments of Christianity before 1949 and after 1979, and are the mainly form of the present Christianity church. The number of the house church believers is several times of the three self church

believers. Some people think that the number of the house church believers accounts for the 70% of the total number of the Christians in China. (Yu, Z.2008) In contrast to some organizations, the house church has little political opinion, especially in the condition of the house church in the countryside. If only the cadres do not interfere in it, it would not involve the faith with the politics. (Liang, J. 1999)

Despite the house church is not very obvious in public sphere, it has many followers and would influence a lot, especially in the complicated and critical situation. The findings prompt us investigate the characteristic of the house church in China.

## **VII. The Church in Countryside**

The number of believers of Christianity in countryside is huge, since the countryside population accounts for the most part of Chinese population. In this section we will discuss the Christianity transmission in China countryside.

Historically, Christianity had been spread in China for several times, but failed. Although the communication between China and the west became more in modern history, the slaughter on the Christianity also happened in the Boxer Rebellion. However, things changed since the reforming and opening. The government took a more tolerant policy for the churches, so the Christianity developed more smoothly. The rural Christians not only can attend the ritual activities, but also can keep other folk activities. Under the more loose environment, the number of the Christians began to increase.

According to Marxist theory, the economic base determines the superstructure. The economic base of the rural should be investigated. Compared to the traditional mode of the production, the rural has more mechanized operation way, and that results in more free time for the peasants. Besides, the material standard of the peasants was also improved. Another important change is that the peasants have less children caused by the family planning policy, so the peasants do not need spend as much time as before in raising children. But the entertainment facilities and group activities in the rural areas are less than the urban areas. In particular, some traditions and customs disappeared in the cultural revolution and reforming and opening course. The peasants need some social communication and entertainment, and the Christianity meets the requirement of the peasants. In the rural areas, the Christianity has five functions in politics, psychology, morality, culture and social welfare. (Mou, Z.1995)

Another reason should also be addressed in order to understand the Christianity in rural areas, and that is the change of the classes in the rural areas. Before the establishment of P. R. of China, there was an important class, the squire, in the rural areas. This class maintained the stability of the rural areas and the traditional culture, order and custom. Although the squire class was not the bureaucratic class, it functioned well or better than the government, especially in the thought, culture and custom spheres. After the establishment of P. R. of China, the squire class disappeared, which resulted in another situation of the rural areas. The grass-roots power unit replaced the squire class. Although the grass-roots power unit maintained the stability of the rural areas, but it could not maintain the culture and custom well because of the cultural revolution. In some spheres, the peasants' spiritual life fell into the vacuum, and the Christianity fill the vacuum.

There are three reasons for the peasants to follow the Christianity. One reason is due to the diseases, which get them into trouble. Another is for the spiritual ballast. The third is because of the family environment. The children grew up in the Christians' family would believe in the Christian. (Sun, F. 2011) Investigation shows that many Christians in rural areas believe in Christianity is due to practical reasons. "Practical reason means that it focus on the real social life, without the metaphysical analyze and the irrational passion. It emphasizes the practical, reality and action and are content in the empiricism thought, proposing the rational action mode. It has the aggressive and sober attitude, and has long history in China, existing in the Confucian, Taoist, Legalist, Mohist thought of pre-Qin Dynasty." (Sun, F. 2011)

In general, once the problems are solved by believing in the Christianity, the others would accept such religion. "Rural society is a place of where the individual is born and dead, restricted by the locality. The normal life is one spends the life time in the hometown. If all people in one village have the same life mode, the personal relationship would has the feature that every child grows up in other people's eyes. For the child, the other people are familiar, too. That is a familiar society without strangers." (Fei, X. 1998) The influence between each other familiar peasants is one important way for the Christianity transmission. Generally, if one believes in Christianity, the others would know about that in rural areas. The misfortunes of the individuals in the rural areas would be known soon by the others, and some Christians would contact with them. The trust between the familiars provides good foundation for the Christianity transmission. In the condition, the Christians increase soon. Compared to the missionaries' way of distributing the leaflets and giving the speech in the street, the mode of transmission is more effective.

The believers of any religions in China would be utilitarian and practical. Only if the religion can resolve

the problems or be useful, people would be the believers of it. The Christianity in the rural areas complies with the need of peasants, for example, once some people are in trouble, the Christians would contact with them and help them to draw them into the churches. Many believers of Christianity become more optimistic and pleasant, because they get much help from the Christians or be moved by the positive attitude of Christianity, and that is helpful when they are in trouble. The helpful experience prompts some peasants join into the churches.

The spread of Christianity in rural areas of China brings some problems, although the peasants get much help. First, the believers are not identified with by the other peasants, although they are accepted and understood by the other peasants for they do not disturb the life of the countryside. They would be the talking point when the other peasants gossip with each other. On the other hand, the rural administrators would be afraid of the religion transmission, because the religion sometimes would be the cult and that would bring about the social problems.

The Christianity transmission situations are different in northern China and southern China. In northern China, the transmission is wide because the traditional belief system was destroyed almost totally in the cultural revolution. But the situation is different in southern China, in many places of southern China, there are still many Buddhism temples and ancestral halls kept intact. The evil cults appear in northern China generally, but they can not be active because of the strength of the orthodox Christian churches. In the southern China, they would be active and public because the orthodox Christian churches are less in southern China compared to in northern China.

The transmission of Christianity does not influence the rural social governance, but it forms the small groups, and sometimes the groups would be opposite to the governance. Some researchers believes that the characteristics of the Christianity causes some crises for the social governance of the rural areas. "Christianity tries to involve in the social and political affairs in countryside. That in fact is competing for the leadership of the countryside with the Chinese Communist Party." (Xiu Yuan Foundation, 2010) Although the phenomenon in countryside is rare, it still need to be guarded against.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

The environment of the religion transmission changed in recent years compared to the ancient and modern times in China. China people tend to accepting the new ideas and thoughts more easily, or even hungrily. The speed of Christianity transmission is faster than ever. But there are still some factors that would not be controlled well and are the secret worries, which are the house church and the Christianity in rural areas.

The house church is the main mode of transmission in China, the believers in the house church accounts for the most part of Christians in different transmission modes. The peasants believers accounts for the most part of the Christians in the different classes because the peasants account for the most part population in China and the peasants tend to accepting the Christianity for the inclusive environment and fulfillment of the practical and utilitarian requirement.

The number of house churches in China are several times of the Three Self churches that are registered in government. The guidance cannot reach them, so sometimes the cult would be transmitted in them. The churches in the rural areas develop fast, but that is also bring about some secret worries.

Official institutions in China keep a watchful eye on the Christian church, because in modern history some missionaries were believed as the forerunners of the invaders, and on the other hand, there are still some concern about the differences between Chinese ideology and the western ideology. The house church and the church in countryside, especially in the southern China would be the secret worries of the official institutions in contemporary times. But those are also the critical aspects to understand the Christianity transmission in China.

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